



*Together Effectively Achieving Multiculturalism*

**The  
Westport  
Library...**

**2017 TEAM Westport / Westport Library  
Teen Diversity Essay Contest Winners**

- **Second Place Josiah Tarrant, Staples High School**  
Essay: **"White Privilege and Me"**     Prize: \$750

## White Privilege and Me

At 16, I've lived in the comfort of Westport my whole life. With the exception of a brief eight-day stint in Ethiopia while bringing home my little brother when I was seven-years-old (the first time I became acutely aware of the ghostlike whiteness of my skin), I really never thought much about race. Crazy considering the family I grew up in. Somehow my brother was always "just my brother." Our family was normal to me, even though we often drew attention from strangers when we were out and about. I grew up surrounded by teachers, coaches, principals, and doctors, all of whom looked like me and shared my skin color. Like most Westport kids, the thought of this never crossed my mind. This is white privilege.

It wasn't until I was 12-years-old that my learning on racism really began. I still remember the day we returned from swim practice and my mom began yanking all of my childhood books off of the shelves. She enlisted my help to find my brother, then 6-years-old, an Early Reader book featuring a kid that looked like him. I stood next to her and my brother on those visits to libraries and bookstores when we were shown to the "slavery section." That day marked the beginning of an awareness of how much I had taken my white experience for granted and a realization that things would not be the same for my brother.

It wasn't smooth sailing for me. I still remember being appalled at my mom's use of the word "black" as if she had said a bad word. "Mom you can't say that, that's racist," my 12-year-old white male self said. In school, for as long as I could remember, we had been taught not to acknowledge differences of race. The messages I had received had been: "we are open-minded," "slavery is over," "we don't have racism here." President Obama was the only President I had ever known.

As I grew up, I started watching. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, their deaths marked my teen years. I started reading. Peggy McIntosh, Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates began to inform me. Recently I heard Professor Tricia Rose speak about “post-racial” racism, reinforcing that my childhood belief system had been a convenient myth. We were taught we must remain colorblind, and look at people of color and whites the same way. While I agree, it only makes sense if everyone is already on an equal playing field, which we are not. This is why a discussion of white privilege is critical.

When I saw the negative reaction of some community members and whirlwind media coverage of the white privilege essay contest “controversy”, I knew that I could not let my white privilege prevent me from taking a stand. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” So, this teenager who still has much to learn on this topic sat down to write.

What I do with the knowledge of my own privilege is what I have been thinking about most. Acknowledging it is a crucial start. It puzzles me that some white adults react so defensively to even discussing the term. The fact that we live in a town where we can and do strive to discuss white privilege makes me proud to live in Westport. To those who rail against it, I ask, how, when the fact remains there is so much not being taught in our schools? We are not learning that our economy was built on free slave labor, nor about voter suppression, mass incarceration and blocks to mortgages for non-whites, nor that nearly one in three black males will serve time, losing employment opportunity and voting rights, while white kids around me face minimal consequences for their mistakes.

To those who argue “white privilege” is a liberal tactic that creates white guilt, I say explain to me the racial gaps in our country's education, healthcare, employment, wealth and incarceration. I invite you to sit down and assure me when my brother is a teen out in the world, he can walk with his black friends freely down Main Street as I did, and that clerks and customers alike will look upon him as the great future promise of Westport as they did on me.

Assure me that other parents will not call him out for being “aggressive” when their sons are being just as intense on the soccer field, that his teachers will hold him to the same high standards to which they have held me and push him to reach his fullest academic potential. Assure me that when Westport parents tell my mom that “he’ll have no problem getting into college,” my brother will know that these schools want him for his brilliance and talent and not his skin color. Assure me that these same adults will educate themselves on how challenging it is for most students of color to get into prestigious universities without strong public schools, alumni legacies, and financial resources for tutoring and college visits. Assure me that when police pull him over (statistically they will), the extra training my parents instill in him will keep him safe. Assure me that I will not have to watch my brother, or someone else's brother who looks like mine, be the next tragic TV news story.

Until you can assure me of all of that, I will continue to educate myself and use my advantaged status to speak up. So, you ask how does white privilege affect me? How doesn't it? My abundant white privilege motivates me to use it for good, but I also must do this so that my brother knows that wherever life takes him, I have his back. I vow to be right there alongside him as we together show the Westport community that white privilege is not a black issue, but an everyone issue.