



**The
Westport
Library...**

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

- **Third Place** Claire Dinshaw, Staples High School
Essay: **"The Privilege of Ignorance"** Prize: \$500

The Privilege of Ignorance

When I was born, I was placed at the top of a predetermined racial hierarchy. Magazines told me my skin was beautiful. CVS carried bandaids that matched my skin tone. History textbooks and acclaimed novels told the stories of people like me. When I was born, the world made sure to tell me I was important.

Not everyone received the same welcome.

White privilege is like a trust-fund, a bonus given to every white American as a result of an ingrained societal prejudice that ascribes certain traits to white Americans and certain, often less flattering traits, to non-white Americans. Because white is seen as the 'norm' in America, white Americans have been granted the power to define what is moral, ethical, and successful. As a white American, I have not always been aware of my privilege, but I have come to see the innocence, predictable success, and overrepresentation I benefit from as byproducts of my race.

In elementary school, I had no concept of race, and I certainly did not see myself as benefitting from any type of white privilege. Westport schools did not involve elementary schoolers in discussions of race, and adults had evidently decided that the history of American racism was not my problem. After all, why explain racism and white privilege to the little white girls and boys?

Partially as a result of this prolonged, privileged innocence, most Westport students, including myself, initially fail to see the ways white privilege has contributed to our success. We study for a test and receive an A; we apply to summer programs and gain admittance to one; we find a job and save money. To us, hard work is the cause of every success. What we fail to question is why the outcome of our hard work is always success. There is never a time when we study hours for a test only to have a hard time getting a ride to school the next morning, prepare

for an interview only to get turned away because of prejudice, or work desperately hard only to consistently be the victim of racial profiling by law enforcement.

Many in Westport will ascribe this privilege of predictable success to wealth, not race. However, while it is true that all Westport residents enjoy the privilege of living in a safe community with highly rated public schools, non-white Westport residents still face barriers. Whereas I can find skin care products easily, non-white Westport residents will find that stores mostly carry beauty products designed for white skin; whereas I can turn on the news to find countless white role models, non-white Westport residents will find that the majority of politicians, anchors, and corporate leaders resemble their white classmates; whereas I have been taught by countless white teachers, non-white Westport residents are forced to contend with the fact that, although research published in *The Economics of Education* found that test scores increase when a student has a teacher of the same race, Staples High School has only recently hired its first full-time black teacher.

I know from personal experience that wealth cannot overcome the deficits of underrepresentation. About twelve years ago, the only female power-players in Washington D.C. who frequently appeared on the news were Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton. At the time, women were so underrepresented in Washington D.C. that when I first saw Pelosi on television I asked my father whose wife she was because I did not believe women like me could be politicians. If I had been born a black woman, I might still believe I could not be a politician.

Furthermore, the wealth privilege argument fails to consider the role that white privilege plays in someone's ability to move to Westport. The societal impact of white privilege means white Americans are more likely to hold college degrees due to education inequality, less likely

to go to jail for drug offenses due to a prejudice criminal justice system (even though white men, according to hospital records documented in *The New Jim Crow*, are three times as likely to use illegal drugs), and more likely to face discrimination in the housing and job markets due to stubborn racist beliefs. This equates to white Americans being more likely to be able to afford a home in Westport and other upper-middle class suburban towns.

As a result, despite the fact that segregation is illegal, integrated regions and school districts are rare, and white Americans are often quick to fight plans to increase diversity. When parents from the predominantly white Francis-Howell school district in Missouri heard that approximately 1,000 students from the predominantly black Normandy school district were going to attend Francis-Howell schools, they were outraged. The incident was documented in the *This American Life* episode “The Problem We All Live With.”

“We are talking about violent behavior that is coming in,” one parent says during the broadcast. “Is there going to be a metal detector?” another parent asked. The truth is, once white Americans have control of something, whether that be a school district or corporate America, the choice of whether to share that privilege with others also becomes our privilege, and we have not historically been very open-minded.

To be clear, I am not blaming anyone for failing to recognize white privilege. It is a complex concept to grasp, especially in Westport, a town that is over 90 percent white. Growing up here, students like me rarely see the contrast between the way they are treated and the way non-white Americans are treated.

In fact, even as I conclude this essay, I know I have failed to describe the ways white privilege has impacted my life. I know there are sources of privilege I have failed to recognize.

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The truth is, I still do not fully understand the extent of my privilege, and that is something I have to work tirelessly to rectify. After all, being ignorant of my privilege is a privilege itself.