



Together Effectively Achieving Multiculturalism

**The
Westport
Library...**

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

- **First Place: Chet Ellis, Staples High School**
Essay: **"The Colors of Privilege"** Prize: \$1,000

The Colors of Privilege

It was second period and our US History class quieted once the bell rang. But not just because of the bell. Our classroom, usually busy with thought provoking conversations was anxiously anticipating the lecture today on racial equality. My teacher was thankful to have at least some diversity in class this year. We three African American students in the same classroom at Staples High School was a rare sight. Since our town is 92.6% white and just 1.2% black, she explained how most years when addressing issues of race in the classroom she would get to use the line, "let's ask all the black people in the class..." to a silent room. Her joke broke the ice, and we dove into a thoughtful discussion about race relations in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

In the midst of our discussion, a student raised her hand to add an anecdote about seeing a student from another school holding a sign at a football game. She said that on the sign was written, "Warde [High School] has N*****," except she used the actual word. In US History class. In our 92.6% white Fairfield County suburb. My body froze. Time stopped. I never did hear the end of her story. The air became viscous and the tension in the room felt palpable. The teacher deftly interjected to continue the flow of the conversation, pointing out the power, sometimes, of confronting such ugliness head on, but for the rest of class, I sat stunned. I knew the student hadn't used the word in a malicious way, but the response from my body was primal.

The N-word is a word that takes African Americans back to 1619 on the tobacco fields of Jamestown and the very beginnings of the American tragedy of human enslavement. It reminds us of Jim Crow, of the senseless beating of Rodney King, and of the killings of 258 black people by the police in 2016. Nevertheless, several of my white friends want to use the N-word in recounting their favorite lyrics. Others even claim that keeping them from saying it is some form of reverse racism. They, like the student in my class, don't understand how the word takes my breath away.

As a black teen in Westport, race issues in and outside the classroom are unavoidable. One afternoon at track practice, some white friends were discussing how hard it would be to get into college and then out of nowhere one said, "Chet you don't have this problem because you're black." I was stunned and mumbled something instead of firing back, "Your parents are third-generation Princeton and your father runs a hedge fund and yet you think my ride is free?" Even seemingly safe discussions about our sport can be racial minefields. I remember a terrific runner on our team saying after he lost, "I mean I was running against two giant black guys" and the other teammates nodding with understanding.

All of this casual black envy doesn't take into account American history. A history where slavery and segregation were the law, and black inferiority the unwritten law. In 1940 an experiment was conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark to help understand the physiological effects of segregation on children. Today this study is colloquially known as the "The Doll

Tests.” In these tests, students would be given identical dolls, except for color, and asked which one they liked more, which one was more pretty. An overwhelming amount of participants from both white and black communities chose the white doll.

My own “Doll Test” occurred in the fifth grade, when I moved to Westport from Manhattan where I thought we were upper middle class. I would look up at all the houses bigger than our rental and imagine what life would be like if I were born lighter and richer. I had no grasp of the deep social issues that had been keeping my people from attaining such heights of prosperity; didn’t yet understand the lack of truly wealthy black residents in my town as indicative of larger social issues. Now as a sophomore in high school, I have a better understanding of the legacy of institutionalized racism. Now I see the history behind the big houses.

I see my fifth grade envy mirrored in my classmates’ jealousy of how fast I can run or how high I can jump. I know my classmates know about the deep social issues African Americans have had to face and are still facing today, but in our peaceful bedroom community that struggle is not present on a day-to-day basis. Students get blinded by the thought that a student could get into college more easily because of their skin color, while not seeing that African-Americans are twice as likely to be unemployed, and once employed earn nearly 25 percent less than their white counterparts. They don’t see that despite making up 12% of the population, we are 35% of jail inmates and 24% of people shot by the police.

Honestly, I never really thought much about white privilege until I moved to Westport. From a young age, I was taught that not everything is meant to be fair and to deal with it. But living in this place where almost everyone is white makes me question, when I’m in Walgreens and the manager follows me around the store, would this happen if I looked different? Now I see the need to speak out, to address white privilege when it happens, so that people know that it’s real despite their best intentions, like the girl in my class pointing out that despicable sign at the football game. We need to make sure there is an open discourse that includes a more diverse history and a sensitivity to each other. In our town it’s impossible to have three black students in every class, but maybe we should all imagine that they are there just the same, and that they will speak out.