

First Prize: Chet Ellis, Staples Senior

The Sound of Silence

You have two choices being a black person in Westport, Connecticut. You either do your best to be invisible, or you embrace the fact that in every situation you will be the very noticeable splash of color.

By the seventh grade, I decided to hide in plain sight. I covered myself in rags from J. Crew and Vineyard Vines as camouflage, trying to show the people around me that I belonged. My disguise was perfect — or at least I thought it was until one microaggression after another reminded me how feeble my disguise really was.

"I'm blacker than you," was a revelation white students often stumbled upon after hearing that I had not yet listened to the new Lil Wayne album. While my pigment acted as a tangible disqualifier to their claims, they would continue on to describe me as "the whitest black person they know." What they were really saying was that I didn't fit the stereotypes they grew up on. Knowing the underlying sentiment behind their words, I could have confronted them. Instead, time and time again I stood there, silent.

Anyone who knows me knows I love to argue. I would fervently defend my position on why the snickerdoodles in the cafeteria were better than the sugar cookies, but when asked for my take on affirmative action I would just mumble and change the subject.

I thought my silence was saving me, but I eventually came to realize that it only made me more of a magnet for microaggressions. My middle school math class could've been confused for a 1950's comedy club, with everyone vying to tell the most tasteless, insensitive racial joke. I'd say the winner was one of my tablemates who came running into class one day grinning and out of breath. "I got a good one. How long does it take for a black woman to poop?" I held my breath, "Nine months!" He exclaimed, jittery from what he had thought was comedic gold. I simply flashed my teeth in his direction and tugged up on the corners of my mouth to form a plastic smirk. He had offended me to my core, and yet there I was feeling compelled to smile so as not to offend him.

I see now that every microaggression I let slide in middle school opened the gates for more aggressive aggressions in high school. On the freshman soccer team, always under the guise of "jokes," at least monthly something would sting. I remember one game my teammates used to play, "get that minority," where they would chase and tackle me or the other brown kid.

That it was un-politically correct was precisely their point. In their minds they weren't racists, they were pretending to be racists. But to me, it was so surreal and wildly outdated, I could only imagine passersby thinking we were all performing some sort of grotesque historical reenactment. Of course, at the end of every practice, I'd just smile and say see you tomorrow.

Then, when my team took our yearbook photo, a teammate suggested I move to the center. At the time I didn't get the joke, but apparently, it would be funny if the one black person was in the dead center of the photo. Persuaded by my teammates, I kneeled down and smiled. I hadn't thought again about the picture until one of my friends came to me, visibly exhausted from laughter, and showed me an edit of the photo on his phone. One of our classmates had photoshopped Klan hoods on every one of my white teammates' heads and kept me smiling away in the dead center. For a long moment, I forgot that I knew how to breathe. I looked at my friend, who was looking back at me to see if I'd continue to be a good sport. It took me a moment, but once again, I pulled out the old plastic smirk.

But by the time I got home, I knew that I'd had enough. I started researching why it was so hard for me to speak up and discovered a study on the interaction of "token" women in the workplace. In the 1977 research paper entitled "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life," author and Harvard Business School professor, Rosabeth Kanter, studied the lone women in otherwise all-male workplaces, but her research also seemed to apply to me. Kanter wrote, "If tokens collude, they make themselves psychological hostages of the majority group. For token women, the price of being one of the boys is a willingness to turn, occasionally, against the girls. The token woman, in other words, is required to sell out her own kind."

These words rang in my head. "Had I sold out my own race in an effort to fit in?" By not speaking out at the microaggressions early and often, was it my fault that I experienced an escalation of egregious racial incidents? If my teammates had not known that I would stay silent and instead defend myself and my race, perhaps they would never have dared flaunt a "joke."

So I've come to realize that racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas are like weeds that need to be yanked out at their inception. As soon as you see them poke through the ground, it is our responsibility to pull up each and every one from the root. Left unaddressed, these toxic ideas and sentiments blossom into vast fields of hate and bigotry. I don't blame myself for being racially targeted. However, I do blame myself for not speaking out. If I could have found the strength to stand up back in middle school, who knows who would have stood up with me?

Second Prize: Angela Ji, Stapes Senior

Ripping off the Bandaid: Microaggressions and How We Address Them

Microaggressions are a bit like finger pricks. While they do not leave as large a mess as a sword wound in the form of Jim Crow laws or Japanese internment would, they are enough to make you wince. Some people are more sensitive to finger pricks than others, but we all bandage ourselves up afterwards, ignoring the sting in our thumb.

Professor and author Derald Wing Sue describes microaggressions as everyday slights that target your identity' as a member of a marginalized group. As a Chinese-American girl who has lived in Fairfield County for her entire life, I am no stranger to them. My first introduction to microaggressions was in elementary school, where a classmate pulled the corners of his eyes back and asked me how I could possibly see if my eyes were so small. I met microaggressions again in middle school when a friend asked me about the Japanese language because "Japanese, Chinese — they're basically the same thing." I still get finger pricks from time to time. When someone seems shocked at how American my name is. When someone claims that my gender is the reason I get into STEM programs. When a stranger this past February grabbed my arm, asked me where I'm from, and refused to let go unless I say that I'm from China because "Westport" did not cut it.

I remember these moments clearly, how my emotions — confusion, frustration, disbelief, anger — spilled out as a shaky "...thanks?" "...sure?" "...cool?" I remember how I was at a loss for words, how I smiled awkwardly and just nodded. And while I cannot speak for all marginalized voices, I know that many have experience doing the exact same thing. We feel the pressure to keep quiet and move on to avoid conflict, often internalizing any feelings of invisibility that arise.

There is disagreement among researchers over the physical and psychological toll of constant exposure to microaggressions, but it is hard to deny that daily reminders of your outsider status have lasting effects. Researchers describe them as diminished self-esteem and impaired performance, to name a few. I think of them as the times I wished my hair, eyes, and skin were a different color so that nobody would question my nationality, the times I refused to bring lunch to school after someone laughed at my dumplings in kindergarten, the times I wanted absolutely nothing to do with my heritage.

"Ripping off the Bandaid: Microaggressions and How We Address Them"

But I'd like to talk about the way we talk about microaggressions. Too often, we do not know how to address them, so we refuse to acknowledge their presence, which sends a message that one's experiences are invalid and creates an even greater gap between groups; this hinders positive discussion of topics like racial issues, gender inequalities, and religious discrimination. Our approach to those on the receiving end of microaggressions should not be "get over it" but rather "what can we do?" Simultaneously, it is futile to condemn someone for inadvertently delivering a microaggression. Nobody will ever accurately gauge the sensitivities of others or make the perfect remark, and every single one of us reading this essay, whether we want to admit it or not, has delivered microaggressions at some point.

Because, microaggressions are a complicated topic; at the barest level, they are intangible expressions arising from societal constructs that straddle the line between offense and ignorance, and they will always exist. The question should not ask how we should eliminate them from our speech, which is both impractical and impossible — how do you control words, thoughts, expressions without turning into an Orwellian dystopia? — but rather how we can react to them and lessen their impact on individuals. We need to be willing to have open discussions; for this multifaceted issue, the responsibility does not depend on one person. All of us, as recipients, initiators, and witnesses must be willing to understand the circumstances surrounding these comments, explain our perspectives, and adapt our speech.

Take the "Where are you from?" incident from February. I described the man as "racist," but perhaps "misinformed" would have been a more apt description. He grew up when the population of Asians in America was less than one percent. And, if he was from the New York area as he said, many of the Asians he came into contact with would have been immigrants rather than the second-generation. Perhaps, under friendlier circumstances, I could have explained to him that his question was flawed rather than cut him off completely, or told him why his insistence on a response containing an Asian country did not sit well with me.

And while we should not denounce people before discussing, that does not mean he is not responsible for his words; he, like many others who have also asked me this question, could have corrected himself with, "Where are your ancestors from?" upon realizing that I was not giving the desired answer. Without fully understanding the experiences of others, we need to realize that we

are bound to ask wrong questions — It • is important that we are willing to adjust our speech and learn through talking to others.

Fostering an open discourse is not just limited to individuals, however. It is crucial that administrators and teachers promote direct exposure in our education to encourage cultural awareness and tolerance in our students so that they are prepared for informed conversations in the future, especially in a school district that is 90% white. We can follow California's footsteps and advocate for policies that incorporate LGBTQ-inclusive history textbooks into our curriculum. Or, we can encourage teachers to hold classwide discussions about racism earlier on in our education — my first one was this past November in AP English Literature, many years too late.

We are far from being a spotless society, and it is going to take a multitude of ideas and trials to lessen the long-lasting impacts of inequality. We've ripped off the bandaid. Now, let's ease the throbbing in our fingers.

Third Prize: Daniel Boccardo, Staples Senior

CACTUS IN A RAINFOREST

"Where are you from?" For me, that question is complicated. My parents were born and raised in Venezuela; I was born in New York. When asked, I naturally respond with, "I'm from New York. To which the person asking the question looks at my brown face and asks, "But, where are you really from?" I then respond, " Venezuela. " This usually elicits a strong reaction from family members who actually did live in Venezuela. I claim I'm not truly Venezuelan and call me what they think I am, a gringo. So if I'm being completely honest, I'm not sure where I'm from.

I've lived my whole life not really caring where I'm from, figuring I'm me and who cares where I was born? But today I realize my heritage matters more to society than I thought; we live in an "us vs. them" world. Clearly, I get asked where I'm from so the questioner can figure out whether I'm part of their "us" or their "them." This is particularly divisive when the leader of the free world publicly espouses that ("us" and "them" need to be separated by a wall because "them" are raping and murdering 'us.')

The challenges associated with being the child of Venezuelan parents living in NY began early. I attended public school while being raised by parents who knew little English. My mother taught me the only language she knew at the time, Spanish. Not knowing English led to many difficulties in school. Teachers didn't know what to do with me because I was so quiet and didn't read or speak like the other kids. This led to my parents being called in frequently to meetings which they couldn't really understand because they only knew a little English. In one of these meetings, my Kindergarten teacher asked about my parents' heritage. When learning that they were Venezuelan and spoke Spanish, she proceeded to ask what dialect they spoke. This suggested that my own teacher knew nothing about Spanish or how to communicate with me, as Spanish doesn't have dialects. Spanish is Spanish, it doesn't matter where you go.

From there, I was sent to every special-ed, reading and ESOL class imaginable. I was evaluated by various professionals; Somehow, my public school diagnosed me as having ADHD with mild Autism. They obviously got their "diagnosis" wrong because I had neither of those things; I just didn't speak English. Not knowing English was treated like a disease needing to be cured. I was beaten over the head with English and forced to redo Kindergarten.

As a high achieving senior in high school, I'm one year older than most of my classmates and I obviously don't face the same obstacles I faced as a young boy. But there are some things that I have to contend with which others don't. Being asked questions like, "Do you people celebrate Thanksgiving?" when I've lived in the United States my whole life really affects me. It's not a sharp pain, but a reminder of how I don't seem to belong. There's

CACTUS IN A RAINFOREST

a disconnect between me, my community and the broader society. It sometimes feels as though I'm a cactus grown in a rainforest where cactus don't belong.

I felt this most deeply just recently when I was in the throes of applying to college. I was handed an article by my guidance counselor about how to fill out the FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student [Financial] Aid) documents when your parents are illegal aliens. A person in a position of influence and authority in my high school just assumed my parents were illegal immigrants, criminals. The new Al Qaeda to many Americans. I'm not illegal, and neither are my parents, and today, we speak Spanish and English equally well.

Unfortunately, I am not alone in my struggles. There are countless Hispanics with parents who were born and raised in different countries who sometimes feel as though they are the enemy and have no place in America. These feelings stem from microaggressions perpetrated by people who didn't necessarily have terrible intentions. I believe that most people have their heart in the right place and their messages come from a place of misunderstanding rather than intentional hate.

In our town, there are many things we can do to combat this misunderstanding, starting with parenting. Children aren't born with a particular view of other people and have no sense of what makes us different. Learning tolerance, empathy, and love for all people is crucial. Parents also need to instill a sense of community, reminding children that no matter their skin color or looks, we are all just people who want to make the best of ourselves and our community.

Educators can also help by teaching children to look for similarities and rather than differences. Tear down walls, rather than try to bully Mexico into paying for one. Look at people as not black, white or brown but instead as part of "us." They need to be particularly attentive to my first generation brothers and sisters and my ESOL cousins. For they are as much a part of "us" as Westporters are to each other.

The words of government officials in office may not change, but the voices of our new generation can. Young and progressive voices like that of State Senator Will Haskell need to demonstrate that there is a place in America for everybody. Their words, actions & policies, messages of inclusion, fairness and empathy could be seen and heard through all the news media of today. This will, over time, help to build a stronger sense of belonging in Westport where we can look beyond skin color, accents and clothing and merely see each other as fellow Westporters - members of a community that hopefully can be an example of what America is at its best.

Deconstructing the Voice in My Head

Honorable Mention: Olivia Sarno, Staples Junior

Deconstructing the Voice in My Head

We live in a society that trains us to be heterosexual in every way possible- from advertisements and billboards, to movies and children's books. Each person is given an invisible manual at birth that says "this is who you are allowed to be". The rules in this manual do not lie only in the immense heteronormativity woven into our world, but in the micro-aggressions surrounding us on a daily basis.

Internalized homophobia has always been a voice in my head, warning me that a compliment to a female friend might make me look predatory or that I should dress in the most feminine clothing possible. However, it took me until I was past opening up about my sexuality to recognize not only that these voices in my head existed, but how wrong they were and where they stemmed from.

After coming out to friends and family, they had almost all been extremely supportive, even if it took time to adjust. All of my crippling fears, fears that every LGBT person has before coming out-- that my friends would leave me, that I would have to sit alone at lunch, or that my family wouldn't love me-- turned out to be irrational. So what did I have to be ashamed of?

I saw all of this support laid out in front of me, reassuring me that my future would be okay, yet still felt my insides churn every time I uttered the words, "I'm gay," or "I like girls," as if someone was watching me disobey this all-telling manual. That's the thing about shame- it isn't a switch you can flip after you realize everyone is actually on your side. Instead, it accumulates over time, and like hatred, it is ingrained and acquired. The problem is, when I try pinpointing a singular moment where all of this shame started, I can't; for it was not the result of one horrific event, but rather a build-up of the micro-aggressions I'd heard throughout my entire life. Maybe it's the subtlety of micro-aggressions that make them so impactful- like the hopeful, "do you think you'll ever like men?" questions I've received from friends, genuinely thinking they were

Deconstructing the Voice in My Head

being helpful. Then again, not all micro-aggressions are so subtle; and the worst that I've heard come from the time before I came out, where I could hide behind the safety of the fact that straightness was the default assumption of me. For example, I know the girl from my bunk at camp would never have said she would commit suicide if she "woke up to one day be a lesbian," had she known that I was gay. I know a friend in eighth grade would not have accused a "tomboy" of creepily watching her change for gym, if she knew this either. I know my health teacher in middle school wouldn't have brushed off the "how do lesbians have sex?" question as inappropriate had she considered how that would make LGBT students feel. But since these moments are fragments of a broad, collective issue, these people did not understand the significance behind their words; and I understand this.

There are times when I, too, have said harmful, unintentional words, glued to the pedestal of my own white privilege-- but these are times I can only vaguely remember. This is the very problem with micro-aggressions-- they are not universally detrimental, only harming the marginalized groups they target, while the person delivering the micro-aggression will probably forget what they said at all. Most often, micro-aggressions are inadvertent, and although their impact cannot be erased with a simple "I'm sorry," we need to learn to be conscious of our actions and unafraid to apologize, even if that doesn't solve the entire issue.

However, it is also undeniable that aside from curiosity or a casual slip of the tongue, there are occasions where micro-aggressions are intentionally hateful, not driven by ignorance, but by judgment or prejudice. For example, I know the boys I heard calling each other "fag" in the hallway know better; I know my straight classmate who jests she is a "dyke" because she wears sports logo-wear knows better, and I know the girl who said she would kill herself if she were gay knew better. The issue here is not an innocent lapse in judgment that we are all guilty of at some point or another, but the fact that we are not educated on LGBT issues in school, at home, or by media.

Deconstructing the Voice in My Head

In elementary school, we studied Keith Haring, but didn't learn about his pieces protesting AIDS. In middle school, we spent months covering protests and movements, but never once touched on The Stonewall Rebellion. In Spanish class, when we read works by Federico Garcia Lorca, we don't talk about his queerness during a time of fascism. A rich, beautiful history is lying between the lines of our own textbooks, our own papers, yet homosexuality is never embraced or even represented. Perhaps our curriculum is micro-aggressive in itself, full of minute notions and nuances telling us to silence the parts of ourselves society finds taboo.

Education is one of the few institutions that has the power expose children to diverse perspectives. We can't let school be another rule maker in the manual of who we are allowed to be.

Today, at 16, I am proud of who I am, but there are times I still feel ashamed. I have come to realize that this little homophobic voice in my head is not my own-- but the echo of countless times I have heard my identity be associated with something dirty, strange, or abnormal. As a society, we need to fight back against micro-aggressions, whether this means confronting friends about the language they use, being aware of our own language, or making sure all stories are told. Until we learn to stop forcing certain identities into shadows and embrace our differences, even if we are uncomfortable talking about them, the world is not going to change.