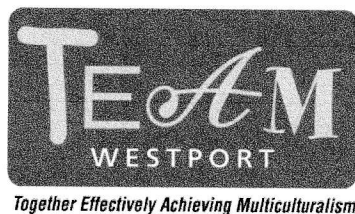


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**2021 TEEN DIVERSITY ESSAY CONTEST
AWARDS CEREMONY
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MONDAY APRIL 5, 2021
6:00PM**



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**2021 TEEN DIVERSITY ESSAY CONTEST
AWARDS CEREMONY**

FIRST PLACE

**"WORDS OF POWER"
MAXWELL TANKSLEY**

SECOND PLACE

**"BLACK LIVES CAN MATTER MORE. HERE'S HOW."
CURTIS SULLIVAN**

THIRD PLACE

**"RESPONSIBILITY OF A NATION"
JADEN MELLO**



Together Effectively Achieving Multiculturalism

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**2021 TEEN DIVERSITY ESSAY CONTEST
AWARDS CEREMONY**

**FIRST PLACE
"WORDS OF POWER"
MAXWELL TANKSLEY**

Words of Power

Does your life matter? For many in Westport, this question borders on absurd. How could my life not matter? For us people of color, however, this question has become more pressing, and the answer has become more disturbing. For me, the answer to that simple question comes from the deepest depths of history and identity and it emerges not as a fully formed manifesto or speech, but as a strong bundle of emotions.

My life matters. I decided on that one pretty quickly. I've also decided that would be the end of it—if I were white. There is not a doubt in my mind that my life matters to me. I recognize my own worth, I recognize my own ability. I believe, for those same reasons, that my life matters to God and the universe. But does my life matter to society? To put it bluntly, do I matter as much to society as a white man?

No.

My life, black lives, simply matter less to the society we live in than those of our white counterparts, and we see it every day. We see it in Trayvon Martin, shot dead in the street. We see it in George Floyd, whose pleas and cries were met with stone-cold silence. We see it in incarceration rates, with black Americans—only 12% of the population—making up 33% of the prison population. We see it in the courts, where our killers go free. We see it in jobs that won't hire us and laws that target us. We even see it in our friends, who say: "He wouldn't have been shot if he weren't resisting" or "You'll definitely get into that school, you're black".

This vast dichotomy between what our lives ought to be worth and what they are worth is why the statement "Black Lives Matter" means so much to me. It fills that gap and expresses—contrary to society—that my life matters.

When I say the words "Black Lives Matter," I feel many things. I feel pride in my black heritage. I feel awe at the tenacity of my ancestors, who suffered for being black. I feel enraged

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that I will be judged not by the content of my character, but by the color of my skin. All these latent feelings—characteristic of the black experience in America—explode cathartically when I think of the phrase “Black Lives Matter.”

Of course, as my interpretations of Black Lives Matter are colored by my experiences, so too are those of others. I remember playing video games with a group of friends when the topic of recent Black Lives Matter protests came up. One of them began to casually rant about how “black lives matter [are] criminals”. Agitated, I remarked that I had an inherent interest in Black Lives Matter, and he flew into a tirade that gave me a slight chuckle.

He raved on about the sins of Black Lives Matter for nearly ten minutes until another friend pulled him into a private call to deliver a nugget of information. See, he had not known I was black—we had never met in person, so he assumed that I, like everyone else in the group, was white. In a shocking twist, his demeanor changed. Somehow, the mere presence of someone with dark skin had caused his arguments to morph into backpedaling at such speed I began to fear for his health.

His and my reaction both were indicative of two different understandings of the phrase Black Lives Matter produced from two different worldviews from two different worlds. He understood it to be the rallying cry of self-victimizing criminals, using the wrongs of a distant past to create unjustified chaos. He saw groups of rioters marching down the main street, with police cars burning in the background. My rallying cry of empowerment was his siren song of destruction, both connected by strong emotional convictions.

Our discussions around race are often emotional because we have so many emotional memories relating to race, memories that we use to form our opinions about the matter. A child who was mercilessly bullied for coming from the poor side of town and one who felt that they

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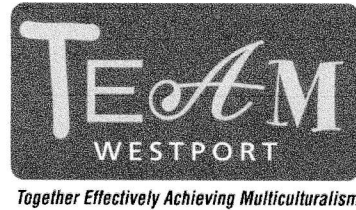
unfairly lost their spot on a sports team to a child of a different complexion will have different outlooks on race in the future, and both will react emotionally when it is discussed.

Because my past experiences with race were emotional, my view of race is an emotional one. I react emotionally when the topic is brought up, I am emotional in my support for Black Lives Matter, and I am emotional in denouncing systemic racism. On the other hand, my friend was equally emotional in his denunciation of Black Lives Matter.

The emotions involved with discussions of race can be a problem, but they are also the solution. These emotions can cause feelings to be hurt and friendships to be broken, but they can also be the key to finding common ground.

When my friend learned I was black, he immediately began to consider how his words affected me. He and I had both felt the same emotions at points in our lives and he—if only subconsciously—began to empathize with me and understand why I felt the way I did.

Needless to say, not all issues of race will be solved with a magical cure of understanding and empathy. Reality isn't a children's cartoon. However, honest, open-minded discussions of race are the best step we can take towards promoting equity and equality in our society. By having these emotional conversations about race and by using these emotions to promote empathy instead of using them to fuel conflict, we can create a bridge to connect people with disparate experiences. By having these conversations, we will encourage effective interracial communication, and we will use empathy to create a better environment for people of all races.



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**2021 TEEN DIVERSITY ESSAY CONTEST
AWARDS CEREMONY**

SECOND PLACE

**"BLACK LIVES CAN MATTER MORE. HERE'S HOW."
CURTIS SULLIVAN**

Black Lives Can Matter More. Here's How.

In the 1950s and 1960s, African-Americans protested unjust laws, which eventually helped frame the Civil Rights Act. But racial discrimination remains embedded in society, even half a century later.

On May 25, 2020, at the height of the worst pandemic the world had seen in over a hundred years, tragedy struck the streets of Minneapolis. George Floyd, an African-American man, was apprehended by police forces after unknowingly using a counterfeit \$20 bill in a convenience store. He found himself with a knee on his neck, pinned by a police officer while he gasped, "I can't breathe" - a phrase that became a symbol for the movement that ensued. After nine long minutes, he died. The coming weeks saw mass protests around the country, demanding an end to police violence and racial discrimination, calling for racial equality through laws and police reform, and raising awareness of implicit discrimination.

The movement, dubbed Black Lives Matter (BLM), was anything but novel. But the added strain of the COVID-19 pandemic, plus additional instances of the lack of police restraint when dealing with Blacks only fueled the flames of racial unrest. There is no doubt that Black Lives Matter will be one of the most important movements of our time. While powerful and necessary, the BLM movement has some critical weaknesses that have been startlingly overlooked. These include: failure to communicate the movement's message and purpose, and a lack of proper leadership to maintain relevance. Left unaddressed, these weaknesses undermine the movement's call to reform.

A clear and easy-to-understand message is critical to any effective communications, but particularly to a social movement. Suffragists argued for the right to vote, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about a dream that all Americans were equal. "Black Lives Matter" is a catchy phrase that left too much room for interpretation or confusion by too many. Some people who are opposed to the BLM movement felt that "Black lives matter" silences anyone who isn't Black. They believe that the movement is saying *only* Black lives matter, and suggests that non-Black

Black Lives Can Matter More. Here's How.

lives *don't* matter. As such, oppositionists have responded to the BLM movement with their own, dubbed "All Lives Matter." This tried to convey the message that every life matters, including non-black lives. All Lives Matter misses the point that Blacks have seen systemic oppression since the founding of this country. In their efforts to remind BLM-dissenters about the importance of Black lives, the protesters stoked fears in some non-Blacks, albeit unfounded, that Black lives might matter *more than* non-Black lives. A simple fix might be changing the slogan to "Black Lives Matter, Too," or "Black Lives Also Matter." This change clarifies the message behind the Black Lives Matter movement, while disallowing oppositionists from claiming that their life might not also "matter."

Undermining the call to reform, the Black Lives Matter movement failed to be clear about their purpose. During the initial phase of the movement, protests helped spawn rioting and violence. However, most of the rioters were not actual BLM protesters. Instead, opportunists were hiding behind the name and the momentum to initiate their own rampages, and push political agendas. Oppositionists were quick to accuse the BLM movement as supporting anarchy, distracting them from the movement's intentions to improve racial equality. These fears of anarchy were echoed by then-President Trump, who used the violence as an escape hatch, to get out of addressing racism as the crisis and the root of the movement. Several times Trump denied the existence of systemic racism in the US. Rather, he pushed a message of "Law and Order," suggesting that the BLM movement was only demonstrating lawlessness, and ignoring the peaceful side of the movement.

Why were policy makers so focused on the "violent side" of the movement, instead of the original call to action? Because when riots first broke out, people within the BLM movement, who were calling for social justice reform, failed to denounce the riots. The movement's message was not clear that it was advocating for police reform. Certain members of the

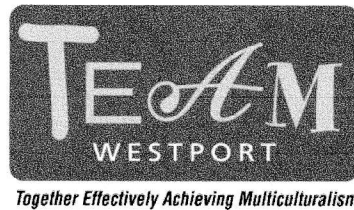
Black Lives Can Matter More. Here's How.

movement even supported the riots and their violence. This distracted the public, and drew policy makers' attention away from reform, and towards suppressing riots.

Most importantly, the BLM movement lacks key figures that the public can identify as its rightful leaders. During the Civil Rights movement, leaders were the public face of the movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X were able to vocalize the vision, and keep people engaged in the fight for the end of racial segregation. This also culminated in the famous *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, and the passing of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, which ended racial segregation in the US.

Every effective movement has some form of leadership representation to help communicate the message of the movement. A person for the public to listen to, and for policy makers to meet with for negotiation and courses of action. Leaders can denounce violence in the name of the movement, and keep a public audience focused on the initial call. Many will say that the BLM movement shouldn't have leadership, as it is more focused on Black voices coming together against injustice, but leadership is important to maintain relevance in the movement. One modern example is the *Global Climate Strike* of September 2019, spearheaded by Greta Thunberg. This movement caused people around the world to protest, encouraging world leaders to take action against climate change. Similar concrete leadership can help the BLM movement, and effectively convey an impactful message.

The BLM movement will be remembered for centuries to come. The call for social justice reform has left a lasting impact on society. However, without a clearer message, and strong leadership, the BLM movement will face significant obstacles in effecting major reform. With these changes, I am hopeful it will be able to fight for a safe and harmonious future for all and for generations to come.



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**2021 TEEN DIVERSITY ESSAY CONTEST
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THIRD PLACE

"RESPONSIBILITY OF A NATION"

JADEN MELLO

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijan McClain. Names most of us recognize. But have you heard of Rayshard Brooks? Atatiana Jefferson? Botham Jean? Somehow, so many victims of racially charged violence go unrecognized. Though we didn't treat them as such, all these black lives mattered. Despite the simple, honorable roots of 'Black Lives Matter', it has been twisted into a politically charged statement due to white people's threatened reaction to the movement, caused by lack of awareness.

In our current political environment, the phrase 'Black Lives Matter' has been twisted into a complex, controversial phrase. But its origins are simple, and meant to acknowledge the oppression of people of color. It is a reminder to our world that black voices need to be heard and are worth listening to just as much as anyone else's. It simply means that black lives matter as much as white lives. All lives *can't* matter until black lives matter, so this phrase, this movement, is simply putting the focus onto a group of people that are not being treated as if they matter.

Many turn against this movement, screaming 'All Lives Matter' in response. But this is a knee-jerk, defensive reaction. Often the people who feel so threatened by the BLM movement are accustomed to feeling a level of comfort in this world that has been built for them. However, these people must understand that 'Black Lives Matter' does not mean that black lives are superior. Despite centuries of protests, people of color are still oppressed and silenced. Our nation's system is still pitted against them. Like Malcolm X said amidst the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's, "Black people are fed up with the dilly dallying, pussyfooting, compromising approach that we've been using toward getting our freedom. We want freedom now" (Malcolm X, The Ballot or the Bullet). People of color have been denied their rights for centuries, and thus it is inevitable that they have become more and more impatient. They are

tired of being told to wait for justice, respect, safety, and freedom, and with this frustration boiling for centuries, emotions have begun to overflow and surge through our nation.

Despite calls for change, people of color are still harmed, yet we expect them not to fight back. Malcolm X said that he believed it was a “crime” for anyone who was being abused to allow themselves to continue to be victimized without defending themselves. The author Ta-Nehisi Coates said that “You do not give your body to the billy clubs of Birmingham sheriffs [...] We must never submit ourselves [...] to defiling and plunder” (HBO’s *Special Between the World and Me*). Despite their peaceful attempts to fight for equality, black people are still violently punished for these actions, constantly forced to accept abuse. Black people should not have to put themselves in harm's way to fight for justice. But it is also a crime to stand by and watch someone else be abused without defending them. White people must recognize that they have led privileged lives, and thus need to be willing to sacrifice parts of themselves in order to defend their fellow black citizens. As a white person, I will never be able to understand this pain and suffering, and the frustration that must come with it. However, I do understand that we cannot leave people of color to defend themselves from “defiling and plunder”. We must take part as equals in their fight, act as shields to protect them in their virtuous fight. We must stand with them, for it is our responsibility to not force them to defend themselves and their rights alone.

In order to be allies of the Black Lives Matter movement, white people must yearn to be educated. We must not take over the movement, but simply listen and empathize so that we can better understand the oppression people of color are forced to endure as best we can. Only by doing this can we strive to become better, more useful teammates of those who have been oppressed. Like Malcolm X said, “On the American racial level, we had to approach the black

The Responsibility of a Nation

man's struggle against the white man's racism as a human problem" (Malcolm X, 375). None of us are innocent, none of us should be comfortable watching these events unfold without doing anything about it. Thus, like Malcolm X believed, we are all responsible to spread awareness and education. The greater understanding people have of our nation's history of oppressing people of color, of what has created this sense of entrapment and desperation, the more they will be able to sympathize with this movement, and hopefully eventually support and be a part of it. Only by each person working to educate themselves and those around them, will Black Lives Matter be able to become de-politized, which will in turn enable people to be more open minded. Only by doing this, will the movement be able to achieve its greatest and most influential potential in our communities and our nation.