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Minority and Friends Network Travel Grant Essay

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February 4, 2009

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At the age of eight, I recall very vividly going on my first visit to Washington, DC. It was there, that I learned about the impact of diversity on this country – the good, the bad, and the ugly. While there, I visited the theatre in which Abraham Lincoln was shot. In the basement of the theatre, I discovered a gift shop, purchased a small book on the life of Abraham Lincoln, and found my calling – I too, had the power to be an advocate. My philosophy on diversity is the direct result of my curiosity. As a heterosexual white female from a fairly culturally homogenous upbringing in a suburb outside of Phoenix, Arizona, I had minimal first-hand exposure to the diversity of the world. Yet, somehow, I have been drawn to topics of equality since that fateful day in Washington, D.C. when I discovered the story of a man who advocated for the freedom of slaves in this country. Curiosity brought me to ask the question, "How is it possible that people have been able to treat other people as less than human?" That question has guided my philosophy on diversity and has led me to take an active role in advocating for the appreciation of our vast differences.

I truly believe that *diversity*, at its core, is about appreciating the wealth of experiences, all different, that make up each individual person and contribute to a social system in which every person is able to find value in the differences each of us possess. In reflecting on my personal philosophy on diversity, I would be remiss if I did not note that I am an identical twin. I am a natural clone – a biological double – and yet, I am entirely unique. In my opinion, that is the simplest definition of diversity. The fact that two people raised within the same family, made up of the same genetic code, can be as dissimilar as my sister and I are, is the best representation of each person's individuality. If no two people are alike, not even the most similar of people - as identical twins arguably are - why then should our social systems prioritize certain traits over others? That question has led me to seek out opportunities to expand my understanding of the diversity we *all* possess, and advocate for the equal appreciation of all the world's differences.

My passion for diversity began when I read about the life and death of Abraham Lincoln at the age of eight. Through that book, and the many more that followed, I learned about issues of oppression

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and I began to recognize them within my own experiences. In the eighth grade, I found that my peers routinely harassed students in our school who were in special education classes. I was appalled by this behavior, and began reading about various disabilities. I volunteered to be a peer assistant in the special education classroom at my school. I shared my experiences with my peers and expected that my friends and classmates recognize the positive contributions of the students I worked with. I learned as much from them as they learned from me. Through that exposure, I realized that when we come to *appreciate* the diversity in this world, rather than *accept* it, collaboration becomes easier and everyone wins. This experience led me to continue my volunteer work within special education classrooms throughout high school and ultimately acquire my bachelor's degree in Special Education and Rehabilitation in May of 2007. Throughout my experience in higher education, I have made it a personal goal to work to address issues of oppression faced by people with disabilities. I have done so through addressing hateful language such as misuse of the words "retarded" and "lame", as well as by working to ensure that my actions are inclusive and accessible when programming within my housing position.

During my sophomore year in college, I came face-to-face with the depth of impact that a lack of appreciation for our differences has on the people around us. I was in my first year as a Resident Assistant when I arrived home to my room and found a suicide note on my door. It was written by a male resident on my floor who was battling with whether he should tell his parents that he is gay. I had been through our campus' SafeZone training which taught me about common experiences and issues of oppression faced by homosexuals in our heterosexist society, but I had not had any first-hand experience with the subject, nor could I fully understand his experience. I quickly recognized my power in addressing the type of oppression that would cause a resident, and friend, to consider taking his own life rather than tell his family about this part of who he is. In order to support the development of an appreciation for the diversity of sexual orientation, I went through training to become a SafeZone facilitator on my campus so that I may be able to present the workshops to faculty, staff and students. I also collaborated with my supervisor and a resident on my floor to found an organization on our campus

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geared at fostering a safe environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning individuals and their allies to socialize and discuss their experiences. I was intentional about opening up dialogue on heterosexism in my social sorority. While I was certainly putting myself in a position to face ridicule from my sorority sisters, I knew that I had a responsibility to help educate others the way I had been educated through these eye-opening experiences.

While helping others develop an appreciation of the differences in our abilities and sexual orientations are two examples of ways in which I have educated myself and worked to help educate others, I have not limited my scope. There are vast differences around us, including socio-economic status, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, backgrounds, experiences, interests, likes and dislikes that make us all unique. As a student affairs practitioner, I constantly seek to truly know people, deeper than the color of their skin or sexual orientation, and I have made it a priority to role model that for the students with whom I work. From my research and programming on women's issues and "mean girls" to ensuring that racist attitudes are addressed in my community, I am committed to helping foster an environment where we find beauty in the diversity around us.

For me, appreciating diversity begins with self-awareness. I must educate myself about the historical context in which we are operating and seek ways to address the oppressive attitudes that have been indoctrinated in us all. Understanding every aspect of diversity in this world is nearly impossible, as we are all diverse, and it seems unfathomable to know and understand every part of every person. However, I believe that it is not necessary to fully understand *all* of the differences within us, but rather it is necessary to appreciate that differences exist and find value in what they offer the world in which we live. It is my responsibility, just as it is everyone's responsibility, to help foster that attitude in myself, my students, and my larger world community.