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Remember Who You Are: My Philosophy on Diversity

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In a world where society judges you based on your social status in life, it's very hard to break free of the mold and live your life according to how YOU want to live it, regardless of how others may judge you. It's difficult to be diverse in a world that struggles to embrace the roots of diversity itself.

The definition of diversity is complex and interesting- everyone has a different answer for what its true meaning is. Is it about appreciating others no matter who they are, or is it about educating others on why you are different? I believe that both of these answers stand true, but I will also go a step further with my ideology- I believe that diversity isn't just about the color of your skin, or the sex of the person you're attracted to, or the god that you worship- I believe it's about YOU individually, and learning to embrace and love your own individual diversity. After all, the word "diversity" is derived from *diverse*- the act of being different from everybody else and embracing those differences that you have.

Thus is the subject of my essay- learning to love and appreciate your own uniqueness, as well as the individuality of everyone you're around. There are many ways one could achieve this goal. Some examples are preaching freedom, breaking down boundaries, and ultimately remembering who you are as a person.

Preach Freedom

If I could give an award to the two people who have had the most impact on how I view the world, the award would easily be given to my parents. Even from an early age, they preached acceptance and openness for every human being and way of life. Although my parents were Catholic, they allowed me to choose my own path and explore my own options when it came to religion. I am incredibly grateful for the method of instruction my parents bestowed upon me- they allowed me to make my own decisions and find my own answers as opposed to being confined to believing in something I wasn't passionate about. This could apply to the ideology of diversity as well- everyone yearns for that freedom to be themselves and to express themselves in the way they wish to be seen- nobody wants to conform to everyone else's standards.

When I became a Resident Advisor in my junior year at East Carolina University, I wanted everyone to open their minds and accept people for who they are on the inside, and not write them off simply because they

were of a different race, religion, or sexuality. In my hallway, I covered the entire wall from floor to ceiling with banner paper, and orchestrated a program I entitled “The Graffiti Wall”. I allowed my residents to write or draw anything they wanted to on this wall, as long as it wasn't offensive. Numerous times throughout the oncoming year, I would walk out of my room to discover people I've never seen before sitting in front of that wall, looking at and reading the wonderful works of art that spawned from this program. Even after a few intoxicated residents from another hallway vandalized everything in my hall, the graffiti wall was left untouched, still standing as a symbol to my residence hall that even in the worst of times, nobody can take away somebody's freedom and individuality. To this day, the graffiti wall still stands in that hallway, covered in poems, colorful drawings, and meaningful quotes, to serve as a reminder to everyone who sees it to embrace their inner selves and to remember that no matter how diverse we all are, we all come together to create a perfect picture.

Become a Boundary Breaker

In my senior year of high school, I wanted to break the mold and show everyone that it doesn't matter what you are in life as long as you're happy with who you are as a person. I made it my goal to be a boundary breaker; somebody who broke down those fortified walls surrounding the idea of diversity and showed everyone that the true goals of humanity are ultimately the same- in the end, everyone just wants to be happy and to know that they've succeeded. Anne Frank had it right when she spoke the following words- “We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different, and yet the same.” Coming from a small school, I was the only person in high school history to be both a starter on the varsity football team and an active member of the chess club at the same time. I simply did what I loved, and ignored all of the critics. As a result, I didn't belong to a single “clique” in high school- I had transversed the stereotypical boundaries of high school and was free to move between groups as I pleased.

Even after high school had ended, I strived to show the world that one should embrace their differences instead of running from them- it's those differences that make somebody interesting. On April 16th of 2009, I participated in the National Day of Silence to support the LGBT group on campus. I carried around note cards stating my purpose: my silence mirrored the silence and oppression felt by those who feel as if they cannot talk to anyone about their sexuality. As a heterosexual male, I learned a lot by participating in this event and it truly

opened my eyes to the suffering that many homosexuals go through on a consistent basis. Afterwards, I put on a program entitled the Circle of Appreciation for my hall, in which everyone stood in a circle, and certain characteristics, such as “I am a black male”, or “I am Catholic”, are called out. Those who have those characteristics would walk into the middle of the circle and everyone would give them a huge round of applause. It was a great program that made people feel proud to be different. It allowed me to break down those boundaries normally held by people, removed their inhibitions and fears, and allowed me to teach them how to embrace and love their individuality and diversity.

Remember Who You Are

The motto that I hold closest to my heart wasn't penned by Shakespeare in his glory days, or exclaimed by Martin Luther King, Jr. to a crowd of thousands, or written by a famous author. In fact, it's one that hundreds of thousands of people have heard, but hardly anyone remembers- and it is found in a Disney film. In *The Lion King*, an adult Simba is running from everything around him and refusing to stand up for what he believes in and accept the fact that yes, indeed, he is different than everybody else. In a breathtaking moment, his father Mufasa appears to him in the clouds and speaks the following words that I will always live by: “You are more than what you have become. *Remember who you are.*” One should always remember who they are in the face of hardship and trouble, and should appreciate and love themselves no matter what- after all, it's our differences that make us special.

In conclusion, I will give the following words of advice: Never be afraid to stand out. Was Michael Jordan remembered for being a “normal” basketball player and for fitting in with the crowd? Of course not. Do whatever you makes you happy- shout your individuality to the world! Be free, and be unrestrained- let nothing hold you down. Show your diversity to anyone and everyone, and let them know that it's okay to be different. Be a boundary breaker, and knock down the walls of intolerance in the hearts of those surrounding you. *Embrace your own diversity*—and most of all, love, appreciate, and remember who you are. Thank you for your consideration of my essay for your travel grant.