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**Minority and Friends Travel Grant Essay**

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**Diversity**

What makes life a rainbow instead of plain, dull, boring black and white? As I sit here in my room in my residential hall in Washington, I am reflecting on the diverse group of young men I have on my floor. I have African Americans and Asian Americans. I have men that grew up in families who are paying their entire college degrees, while others come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and are supporting themselves with Army ROTC scholarship support. As an RA I now face issues of diversity on a day to day basis. I ask myself the question how can I make my floor more inclusive? How can I make people comfortable to express their cultures, personalities, ideals and life stories? I believe diversity is what makes everyone truly human. It is what can bring us together on the strongest level but it is also what can make us feel like aliens in our own world. What makes me different from people in my residence hall? I am a christian, Australian, male student. I also came from a military family. Growing up in a military family has made me sensitive to the struggles of post-traumatic stress in my father and the difficulties this can place on family life. I was born and raised in Sydney which is a city full of diverse cultures, opinions, viewpoints and lifestyles. Sixty percent of the people living in this city today were born overseas however this has been a very recent trend. Until the 1960s there was a White Australia Policy enforced by authorities which created a culture strongly against foreign cultures. My mum experienced this firsthand. My mum faced great rejection from my Dad's parents who were Anglican and of English heritage. They strongly disagreed with my dad dating a Catholic Maltese girl. I often wonder what kind of racial slurs and abuse my mum's family would have dealt with in those times. Were it not for my dad's ability to set his families racial dislikes aside, I may not have been here today.

There were many joys growing up in a large extended family of Maltese Culture in Australia. Nanna would always cook amazing rabbit dishes and Pastizzi's (A maltese dish) cooked with unique Maltese ingredients. Nanna was also a great fisherwoman and she passed onto her ten children a love of the sea and fishing which she had first gained growing up on that small island in the Mediterranean. This cultural love of the sea is perhaps what has inspired my own sister into a career in sailing. The large family size and Catholic traditions within the Maltese culture meant family gatherings were never small or infrequent. My uncle still gathers family from right around Australia to catch up every year in Sydney. My grandmother who once rejected my mum's Maltese heritage now speaks to me about how fortunate we are to have such vibrant family gatherings where food is diverse and no-one stays out of contact. The Maltese wouldn't have it any other way. I often question how my grandmother on my Dad's side could ever have been so closed minded. I am glad that in her older age she has been able to put prejudice aside.

Coming from Australia, I am familiar with racial tensions. Whilst the Anglican-Catholic divide is now a lot less prevalent in Australia, there still exists tension between incoming migrants and the so-called 'real Australians'. The 2005 Cronulla riots were a series of racially motivated riots and mob violence originating in Cronulla, Sydney which spread over three nights, to additional Sydney suburbs. I was in high school when these riots occurred and I still

remember receiving the mass text message which tried to rally up those interested in claiming back 'the true Australia' once and for all by attending the rallies. The riots resulted in mass violence toward Australians of Muslim and lebanese origin. When I moved away to college to a town called Armidale, the racial mix of Sydney was a stark contrast to the town that greeted me after a long bumpy, eight hour train trip. Armidale is a predominantly white Anglo-Saxon town with many people coming from a farming background. A large portion of the town is also indigenous Australians. When I first moved to Armidale I thought that that because it lacked the racial diversity and migration patterns of Sydney, perhaps there was not the same racial conflicts. How wrong I was. Racially derogatory language towards aboriginals was extensive in this town. Whenever fights broke out in town it was always 'the abo's from town'. The aboriginal kids who walked the streets downtown were often referred to as 'troublesome' or 'no-hopers' for no valid reason. These experiences shaped my understanding of how shallow mindedness and ignorance can prevent diversity from being celebrated.

I believe diversity is our physical and genetic disposition combined with our life experiences that make us unique beings. Diversity can include our perspective on the world and how we are affected. Without diversity we would not be human. We would be robotic models each assigned a number. There would be no nationality to be proud of, no experiences or stories to tell. As Anne Frank said, 'We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same'. This statement supports how I view diversity. Whilst we all come from such different life experiences, we are all bonded together by our basic human need for acceptance and love.

When a program called Midnight Basketball started in the college town I come from in Australia for students to act as mentors for aboriginal kids, I saw this as the prime opportunity to show other students that there were aboriginal kids who were motivated and talented. I felt a strong need to disprove some commonly held beliefs of the aboriginal youth in town. I went along to the first program not knowing what to expect. I was given a group of fifteen indigenous kids and was told that I would be their mentor during the basketball tournament. I was amazed by the passion and enthusiasm of these kids. Whilst they wore clothes which showed that they clearly came from disadvantaged families and at times were abusive and uncontrollable, they also had the great enthusiasm of youth and more willingness to learn than some of my fellow college students. I volunteered as a Basketball coach and recruited student volunteers. These kids provided the prime opportunity for students to bridge the racial divide and put their stereotypes aside. The 'Midnight basketball' concept was that on Saturday nights, rather than roaming the streets and participating in destructive behavior, aboriginal kids would play competitive basketball tournaments and learn life skills. It was not long before the local papers were praising this program's ability to bridge the gap between Armidale's indigenous and student population and develop students knowledge of the rich cultural diversity and family situations which many of indigenous kids came from. Australia's indigenous people come from a culture which has been on the continent for 60,000 years. Until recently this was a culture they were told to be

ashamed of by mainstream society. They were told to assimilate or perish. As the program evolved students learnt that these kids were descendant from various tribal clans. They had diverse family experiences. Some were sexually abused, others had parents who had died of alcohol and drug related deaths. Most aboriginal families are large and it is part of their culture for aunts, uncles and grandparents all to live under the one roof. One of the most amazing things about the program was that aunts and uncles would come up to us saying how proud they were of their nephews and nieces. It was great to see that the family circle extended beyond parents only. I believe this experience of cross cultural learning and building understanding of different life experiences was a turning point in the lives of some students. They learnt about the suffering and hardships of indigenous Australians and how racial prejudice and fear of diversity has reduced the self esteem of many indigenous kids to pursue higher education. By the end of the program, student mentors were encouraging the kids to pursue college careers. My good friend Dave had worked with his mentee, Jack to explore the possibilities of agri-business and rural banking. At the start of the program, this same kid Jack had been described as one of the main 'trouble makers'.

Now, working as an RA in America I look for opportunities where diversity can be celebrated and encouraged. I have worked as a student intern in the international office and helped organize programs such as global bridge, peer mentoring and social events for international students know as 'Friday Coffee hour'. All of these programs aim to help international students at WSU express and celebrate their cultural background. My philosophy is that diversity is an essential and wonderful aspect of the college experience. My experiences in Australia have shown me that many people from different cultures often have a lack of self-belief in their ability to achieve academic excellence in foreign countries. At the international centre I help many Asian students improve their essays and I give them feedback on areas where they can improve on their writing. I am always amazed by the drive which some of these international students have to improve their language skills despite the challenge of adapting to a foreign culture.

When I came to America as an RA exchange student, at our RA Training we participated in an activity called 'The line of oppression'. Students were asked to cross the line if they had ever faced discrimination for sexual orientation, gender, culture, opinion and other factors. This experience opened my eyes to how much we don't see in people on the surface. It also heightened my awareness of how American culture, like Australian culture has shamed people for their inherent diversity. This activity inspired me to never make assumptions about people based on their appearance, race or sexuality. I saw how much we lose by being fearful, ignorant and closed-minded. One of the questions asked college men to cross the line if they had ever felt that the male stereotype had caused them to suppress their emotions. Every man there crossed the line. I was particularly surprised to see that so many other men have felt that their masculinity has forced them to deny emotions and other inherent traits which make us human. This was a particularly emotional moment for me. Having grown up with a father who suffers post-

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traumatic stress as a result of his Vietnam war experience, I have always struggled in sharing my emotions with my father. I was inspired to try do whatever possible to make the men on my floor feel comfortable in exploring and expressing their emotions. Last Fall I ran a program for my residents called 'Men, Masculinity and Leadership'. In this program we explored the cultural stereotypes that force men to hide their feelings. My mentor who helped me run this program shared his personal tragedy of losing his brother to suicide and why it is so important for men to talk about their emotions. In my RA programs I now come with a heightened sense of urgency to break down the barriers of oppression which prevent diversity from being celebrated. I believe my experiences of diversity in the Australian and American college experience have shown me that there is a global need to break down the boundaries created by stereotypes and racial discrimination. The result of oppression and conformity is that people do not realize their full potential and the benefits of diversity in their college experience. As John F. Kennedy said, 'The wave of the future is not the conquest of the world by a single dogmatic creed but the liberation of the diverse energies of free nations and free men'. As I pursue a career in residence life I hope to help students realize the amazing opportunities presented by embracing diversity and expressing themselves fully.