

## From Prejudice to Appreciation

I have never been able to find a clear definition of diversity. This dilemma used to really bother me until I realized that it is one of the most difficult words to fully explain. When I think of diversity, it does not just entail race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, or socioeconomic status. Diversity has a hand in any number of characteristics from the region of the country your from to the music you prefer to listen to. For me, diversity means having and being a part of something unique. The beauty of diversity is that it is ever changing.

As I strive to immerse myself in a new situation or with new people, I am always astonished about the different types of diversity that have affected someone's life. I clearly remember a fellow high school student who constantly dealt with the stigma of being a garbage man's son. For my definition of diversity, this was a diverse attribute. He was unique because he identified with being the son of a sanitation manager. I feel that it is the different areas of diversity that truly shape who we are and how we look at diversity. I have been blessed to have been made aware of diversity all my life. From a very early age, I was made aware that I was special. As a child, I became aware of diversity as a white kid growing up in a black neighborhood. As I got older, it was because I loved playing music more than sports. When I entered college, I came out as a homosexual man. These three times were very important to me because they mark the times that I was made truly aware that I had differences. I did not embrace them due to the negative reactions I received from them. As I look back on that time in my life, I am thankful for my experiences because it opened my eyes to how diversity is treated. It

challenged my way of thinking and engaging with people that looked, acted, or sounded different from me.

I feel that it is impossible to fully understand every form of diversity. It is impossible to know exactly what someone is going through based on your own experiences. But, it is important to seek understanding and respect differences. Diversity has a way of blending and combining with other forms of diversity. It creates this deep multi-level diversity that in and of itself is unique to the individual. This makes every individuals experience unique as well.

In my collegiate career, I have incorporated diversity in different ways, some bad and some good. When I first entered college, I thought I knew everything there was to know about diversity. It was as simple as black and white. As long as I maintained a friendship with someone who identified as black, I would maintain my high level of understanding. That same year, I was challenged in my world religions class to visit a mosque. It was here that I realized that I had a prejudice. I do not feel that prejudice is bad. Beverly Tatum explains prejudice as, "a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information." We all have prejudice. It is important to act upon a prejudice by seeking out information a combating that prejudice with knowledge. That is what I have attempted to do in my college career. When I was made aware of my prejudice of Muslims, I willingly went to mosque. But my learning did not stop there. I attended a meeting of a student organization that celebrated the Muslim faith. One of the benefits of being on college campus is that more than likely, there will be a student group that will target something you are looking for. If not, most universities have resources or

books in the library. I feel that it is my hunger to learn that has fueled my interest in diversity.

I specifically chose courses that included diversity in their course descriptions. I love to be constantly challenged about diversity. I seek out to understand how even though we have the same category of diversity, how were their experiences different. When I came out in college, the first thing I did was visit the LGBT student organization. Our meetings consisted of a little socializing and a lot of story telling. This really shaped my view on diversity. It gave me the realization that while I can recognize my levels of diversity, it does not mean I understand or experienced the same things as someone else. I continually thirst for new life stories. I want to find other people's experiences and add their life stories to my book of knowledge. Because diversity is always evolving, I know that I will always be able to broaden my knowledge of diversity. What I have found very interesting in my experiences is the more I seek to understand the people around me, the more I understand myself. I have learned that you can find a piece of you in everyone. It excites me to discover a connection with someone. That has been one of the largest driving factors that have lead me to having a wide variety of friendships. My next step for diversity is to figure out a way to share my experiences and my insights. I look forward to entering the professional field of higher education next summer in hopes of challenging young minds to seek out and embrace diversity. I want to spread my message that to understand yourself, you need to understand others. I am also excited about my career choice because the college campus is one of the few places that all diversity communes. I look forward to continuing my quest for knowledge and continuously developing my definition of what diversity truly means.