

DIANE RYU SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



DIANE RYU

is a junior at Shaker Heights High School. She enjoys painting, reading, and sports, especially lacrosse, baseball and basketball. She is interested in psychology as a college major.

My instincts told me to run away, but the firm grasp on my hand advised me otherwise. My dad slowly urged me into a small classroom. A tingle of fear and a large lump in my throat formed as twenty pairs of eyes immediately stared in my direction. The first grade teacher introduced me to the class and an uncomfortable silence filled the room. I was terrified. I was unable to introduce myself not only because I was shy and intimidated, but because of my lack in ability to speak English.

I moved back to the United States in the middle of my first-grade year and enrolled in a school known for promoting diversity and cultural differences. Coming from Gujook Elementary, a typical South Korean school, I was used to being surrounded by students who were like me. Consequently, I felt awkward entering a classroom with students of all different ethnicities and ranges in skin and hair colors, speaking an unfamiliar language. But the differences that separated us did not stand as barriers for long. I remember how we adapted hand motions and facial expressions as a method of communication. Soon, I was no longer the “new student”, but just another member of my class.

Seven years later, I was walking down an emptied hallway when I passed two girls joking around with each other. One of them shouted, “Go back to your country.” It took me a moment to realize that this statement was directed towards me.

Anger, shame, and humiliation rushed through my being. I quickly walked in the opposite direction to avoid meeting the gazes and snickering of the girls. Perhaps I should have yelled back to show the lack of accent in my English, or shouted that America was my country by birth. But it didn’t matter whether I took the time to explain how I fit into their definition of “American.” The words they had spoken as a mere joke had provoked my deepest fear of being an outcast.

For this reason, I joined a club called Student Group on Race Relations (S.G.O.R.R), with the hope of preventing such humiliating incidents in the future. S.G.O.R.R. is a program where high school students go into elementary classrooms and demonstrate, through various activities, how to avoid stereotyping and discriminating. However, I have realized the significance of such a club for myself and other high school students. By teaching others the value of keeping an open mind, we begin to truly understand the lessons we advocate. Although many of us knew of negative stereotypes often correlated with various ethnicities, we found that the children we talked to were more accepting of diversity. Through this program and through my former experiences, I have learned how invaluable this pure understanding of differences is. The younger children’s ability to accept all people has not only greatly influenced my outlook, but I hope that through S.G.O.R.R, I may also encourage them to sustain such an open mindset as they mature and grow.

