

TELAYNE KEITH SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



TELAYNE KEITH

is senior at Our Lady of the Elms High School in Akron. A Girl Scout for 12 years, she serves on the Council Executive Board and has sold over 3,550 boxes of cookies! Telayne is president of Akron Peacemakers, vice president of her school's Ambassador's Club, and volunteers with Project Citizen teaching middle school students how to affect change in their community. She plans to attend Kent State University and turn her passion for fashion into a non-profit for girls to educate themselves on becoming future leaders.

It was a beautiful day in early spring when four simple words made my heart wrench in a flurry of emotions. The local state park had just been newly renovated and my mother, feeling nostalgic, wanted to experience those memories of picnics she cherished as a little girl. We went on a breezy day after school with my grandmother and aunt so they could share in the experience. While walking on a path to the pavilion we hear a man driving past us say out of his car window, "There goes the park.", in a spiteful tone. My heart immediately sank and I felt like a fist was wrenching it. We all fell silent except my mother, being the tenacious woman she is, responded, "No, it's you who is ruining this park." Her comment came a little too late as he drove off and we kept walking in hope of allowing this moment to pass away.

My grandmother, who grew up in the rural south during the Jim Crow Era displayed a strange array of emotions. She was angry yet, stolid. She could not form a full sentence because of her frustration. I can only imagine the thoughts that circulated through her mind. I searched for explanations for the man's brash comment. I was shocked and heartbroken that someone could judge my family only by the color of our skin. To see three generations impacted by racism all at once was flabbergasting. My grandmother should not have to share this kind of experience with her granddaughter in today's age.

It was difficult to digest, but I realized I had been working to change how society views African American youth all along. As the President of Akron PeaceMakers, a program which strives to promote social and civil justice and a better image of the youth, I was part of that change. As a predominately African American group, we work with the city and the mayor to prevent further discrimination of people based on the color of their skin, religion, nationality, gender or sexuality. We have made major strides in the Akron community including presenting the "State of the Youth" address to community leaders to help clarify the role of youth in the city.

The man's remark has stuck with me and has been my motivation to crush and conquer racism. In those proceeding months, my family held two picnics at that park and we have not faced anymore hatred. My mother's words are to be valued. Just as diverse as the plants, animals, and wildlife of that beautiful park, the people of this planet make up a beautiful environment. The environment refuses to fall because of a single weed trying to suffocate its growth and discovery. The Akron PeaceMakers are out to weed out negativity and I could not be more proud to call myself a gardener.