
Lyssa Collins

is an eighth grader at St. Paul Lutheran School in Westlake. She is active in sports and plays volleyball and basketball. Lyssa enjoys math and would like to become a teacher.

Discrimination is wrong. Whether someone forms a negative opinion about someone else just because of his or her race, religion, ethnicity, or gender, it's not fair to that person. I think discriminating against someone because of appearance is particularly bad. How someone dresses or looks is not necessarily a reflection of what he or she is like on the inside, which is what really matters.

Looking a certain way does not determine a person's identity. People look at outward appearances and can form an opinion about that person that's not true. For example, someone could look at a person wearing all black and think that they are evil or strange although, in fact, that could be the exact opposite of what the person really is.

I'm especially sensitive to this type of discrimination because I'm blonde. Many people assume that, when a female is pretty or blonde, she couldn't be smart. I think I'm fairly smart and am hurt when people treat me otherwise. Although the "blonde equals dumb" perception is not as strong as it once was, people still tell stupid blonde jokes. I know that these are just jokes, and some people think that they are funny, but, for me, they're just hurtful and I think harmful. They're hurtful to me and other blondes because the jokes are insensitive, and they're harmful because they perpetuate an untruth.

Another kind of discrimination that had personally affected me is discrimination against teens. Some people think that all teens are loud, rude, and disrespectful to others. This also is not necessarily true. The teens I know are very caring and respectful. We give back to our church and community and try to live by the Golden Rule, but I know that's not what many adults expect. I know this because I've seen the surprised looks on their faces when I've held a door for them, said "thank you," or just apologized for bumping into them. They see a teenager and just don't expect me to have manners or respect.

People don't realize the negative effect that these preconceptions have. They prevent empathy, understanding, the ability to reach out, and true community. These negative feelings also diminish the Christian spirit of "loving thy neighbor." For the good of all mankind, discrimination of any sort should be stopped, but how?

I think that the first step is education, both in school and at home. Knowing the real facts about a group of people will help to stop people from thinking the wrong thing. Integration will also help. People are more accepting of the things that they know and understand. Therefore, as we get to know different kinds of people and cultures, they'll seem less unusual or weird. Lastly, everyone needs to take responsibility for stopping discrimination. If you see it, first, don't participate, and, secondly, speak up. Not being a part of it or condoning the behavior will go a long way toward stopping it (even if it means not laughing at a stupid blonde joke).