



THE EIGHTEENTH ANNUAL
STOP  **P**
THE
HATE
AWARDS CEREMONY
PRESENTED BY MALTZ MUSEUM



Welcome

Dear Friends,

You are about to meet 30 exceptional young people. Their voices will be heard, and their message is destined to be shared. They are part of a legacy of student upstanders with vision and promise to stop the hate.

This year marks the 18th anniversary of the **Stop the Hate** program. Each year, we marvel at the thousands of students using the power of words to reflect on and respond to intolerance and indifference. As a museum that stands firmly aligned with diversity and inclusion, we are proud to support students who use their voices for good.

Since the program launched, we have provided \$1.8 million in college scholarships and educational grants, and we have engaged over 50,000 students across 15 Northeast Ohio counties to stand up and speak out against hate.

The world needs this kind of program now more than ever. The time is now to support compassion and empathy—not only for others, but also for ourselves.

No single person on Earth is exactly the same as another. We are all different. And together we celebrate those differences. To all the students who have participated in **Stop the Hate**, this is only the beginning. Your voices can and will make an impact! Never stop fighting for what you believe. We can't wait to see what you'll do next!

Sincerely,
Tamar and Milton Maltz

About Stop the Hate

Stop the Hate is the Maltz Museum's signature educational program, serving Northeast Ohio students and school communities through opportunities that encourage personal storytelling to build bridges and create empathy. Through this program, students gain awareness of issues of hate, discrimination, bullying, etc., while also being inspired to courageously create positive change when faced with these challenges. This Maltz Museum initiative celebrates Northeast Ohio students committed to creating a more accepting and inclusive society.

For this year's *Youth Speak Out* contest, students responded to the following prompt, inspired by an excerpt from Alex Stojsavljevic's Grand Prize-winning essay from 2011:

"I have high hopes that one day I can look down upon the world and be glad in knowing that I had a part in it. In that regard, I believe I am just an ordinary teenager – I am living my life and creating a world that I want to live in."

– Alex Stojsavljevic, Stop the Hate '11

In 500 words or less, write a personal narrative about a time when you experienced, witnessed, or became aware of hate, exclusion, or unfairness. How did it shape your thinking, hopes, and actions?

When you reflect on that experience or moment, how do you imagine yourself helping to create a world you want to live in?

Stop the Hate Schools & Teachers of the Year

Stop the Hate Workshop Schools:

Together with our partners at Lake Erie Ink and ROOTS of American Music, we offered free workshops in song, essay, and poetry writing to schools and students. These workshops provided anti-bias and social-emotional learning tools while teaching history, literacy, and the arts to middle school and high school groups.

Much appreciation to:

Almira PreK-8 Academy

Anton Grdina

Bolich Middle School

Brooklyn School

Collinwood High School

Euclid Middle School

Garfield Heights High School

Garfield Heights Middle School

Garfield Middle School

Harding Middle School

Hathaway Brown School

**Horizon Science Academy Cleveland
High School**

Hudson Middle School

Langston Middle School

Mary M. Bethune School

Max S. Hayes High School

Mayfield High School

Milkovich Middle School

Mound STEM School

**Natividad Pagan International
Newcomers Academy**

North Ridgeville Academic Center

Oberlin High School

Paul Dunbar School

**Rhodes School of Environmental
Studies**

Roberts Middle School

Scranton School

Shaw High School

**Stonebrook-White Montessori
Campus**

Tremont Montessori

Wadsworth High School

Walsh Jesuit High School

Windham Jr. Sr. High School

Educational Grant:

Educators in Northeast Ohio dedicated to fostering inclusive learning environments within their classrooms and communities were eligible to apply for a \$1,400 Stop the Hate Educational grant.

Congratulations to this year's grantee, **Garfield Heights Middle School**, who will use the awarded funds to support a reading club centered on *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas. Students will engage in guided discussions and community dialogue exploring empathy, critical thinking, and nonviolent responses to injustice, culminating in a public film screening and a student-produced art showcase.

Stop the Hate Teachers of the Year:

With nominations from our partners at Lake Erie Ink and ROOTS of American Music, the Maltz Museum named two recipients of the Stop the Hate Teacher of the Year award. Each honoree receives a \$1,000 cash prize in recognition of their dedication to their students and personal commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments.

Congratulations to **Kelly Koehler of North Ridgeville Academic Center** and **Janet Creamer of Walsh Jesuit High School**.

"I had the opportunity to work with Kelly Koehler at North Ridgeville Academic Center while serving as a guest speaker for her middle school students. From the start, she was deeply engaged with actively collaborating with me, thoughtfully elaborating on key points, and stepping in to support and guide students when needed. Her bond with her class, combined with her willingness to jump into discussion and dialogue, created an inclusive and respectful learning environment. Kelly's commitment to empathy, understanding, and student engagement wholly embodies the values of Stop the Hate."

– Od Perry Richardson, Lake Erie Ink Teaching Artist

"Janet Creamer's role at the school is scheduling programming that supports equity and inclusion. She put in a lot of work organizing and planning to be able to provide our Stop the Hate songwriting classes for her students. Just seeing her interactions with the students tells me that she is a safe and trusted person for them, but also someone who keeps them grounded and on track. She is passionate about what she does and our program, and she is a pleasure to work with."

– Kennedy Nagel, ROOTS of American Music Teaching Artist

Finalists

2026 Youth Sing Out Songwriting Contest Winners:

Rhodes School of Environmental Studies, First Place High School
"You Don't Know Me"

Walsh Jesuit High School, Runner-Up High School
"Break the Chain"

North Ridgeville Academic Center, First Place Middle School
"We Will Rise"

Milkovich Middle School, Runner-Up Middle School
"Mystery of Iniquity"

2026 Youth Speak Out Essay & Poetry Finalists:

Poetry Finalists:

High School:

Ava Myers, Oberlin High School
Linh Nguyen, Aurora High School
Zoe Pierce, Lakewood High School
Don'Nae Sanford, Walsh Jesuit High School
Myka Steggall, Oberlin High School

Middle School:

Khloe Booth, Almira PreK-8 Academy
Maya Bourguignon, Beachwood Middle School
Christina Chhetri, Bolich Middle School
Farai Chiunda, Beachwood Middle School
Anna Kellermann, Ballard Brady Middle School

Essays Finalists:

Grade 12:

Elizabeth Chen, Berea-Midpark High School

Ayesha Faruki, Mentor High School

Sophie Frissore, Aurora High School

Liam Hernandez, Aurora High School

Autumn Ladner, Aurora High School

Madeline Roisman, Saint Joseph Academy

Ann Varghese, Aurora High School

Grade 11:

Manasvi Gurajala, Solon High School

Austin Rule, Aurora High School

Asher Sullivan, Shaker Heights High School

Grade 10:

Samipa Patel, Solon High School

Younes Tajik, Natividad Pagan International Newcomers Academy

Grade 9:

Eva Jones, Avon Lake High School

Fatima Shah, Hathaway Brown School

Grade 8:

Reagan Eichenlaub, North Ridgeville Academic Center

Karson Kirth, Independence Middle School

Grade 7:

Kylie King-Woods, Hathaway Brown School

June Weaver, Garfield Middle School

Grade 6:

Caleb Lehman, North Ridgeville Academic Center

Peter Metoki, Hudson Middle School

Grade 11 & 12 Finalists:

Elizabeth Chen

Grade 12, Berea-Midpark High School

“Don’t you get sick of eating that every day?”

I looked up to see a boy staring down at my friend’s lunch: her typical jelly sandwich and water bottle. When she stayed silent, burning red with humiliation, he just shrugged and went off to find his friends.

Situations like these are what turn lunchtime into a comparison game that leaves people feeling isolated. If we had the same lunch every day, we were teased for our “poorness.” If we had store-brand (hence, “cheaper”) snacks, we were shunned by those with Pringles and Twinkies as they traded their goodies. Yet repetitive and generic-brand lunches may be the only feasible option for families struggling with food insecurity.

These acts of exclusion and unintentional hate not only perpetuate the stigma around food insecurity, but also dehumanize people for things outside of their control. Unfortunately, these feelings of shame bleed into adulthood. While volunteering at a local food pantry, I noticed how some of our first-time clients seemed afraid or hesitant to be there. Food insecurity shouldn’t define a person and asking for help shouldn’t be embarrassing, but looking back on the lunchtime discrimination that I’d witnessed, I realized that’s what we were indirectly taught as kids.

Wanting to combat these misconceptions, I became an inaugural Greater Cleveland Food Bank student ambassador. As the captain of my school’s ambassador team, I was charged with leading an initiative about food insecurity, so I started by organizing food drives and information booths at school events to advocate to our community.

But then I saw another issue: even though food insecurity is widespread, it’s often not fully understood, especially by youth. I believe this was the case with the boy: his words lacked malice, yet his ignorance caused him to be insensitive and even hurtful. Thus, we created a segment on our school’s morning announcements featuring lesser-known facts about food insecurity to raise awareness and spark discussion, and I worked with principals to arrange food insecurity presentations for the district’s middle schoolers. For my work, I received the Greater Cleveland Food Bank’s Student Leadership Award and the Harvest for Hunger Student of the Year Award from Cuyahoga County Executive Chris Ronayne; yet even more rewarding were the conversations with the eager and curious students. Knowing that I had impacted a young audience made the months of designing fun trivia and rehearsing the presentations worthwhile.

The team has continued to grow and so have our goals. I’ve nearly doubled my school’s program participation, and we’re actively working to reach an even larger and younger audience—this year, it’s the elementary schoolers. Children are the future, and building a compassionate society starts with them. That’s what makes education and raising awareness so important; by exposing students to these issues early on, we can more effectively dismantle prejudice and promote understanding and empathy. I want them to know that it’s okay if our lunches look different, but kindness and empathy should always be on the menu.

Elizabeth loves expressing herself creatively through bullet journaling, writing, drawing, and playing the violin. She serves as captain of her school’s Speech and Debate team, president of the National Honor Society, president of the Symphony Orchestra Service Council, and concertmaster of the Chamber Strings. She also leads her school’s Greater Cleveland Food Bank student ambassadors and regularly volunteers at local food banks to help combat hunger. This fall, Elizabeth will attend Harvard University to study Economics. She hopes to better understand economic policies and systems, continue her advocacy work, and conduct research aimed at creating more equitable and effective economic solutions.



Ayesha Faruki

Grade 12, Mentor High School

I grew to hate the rubbery touch of cold gloves and the lingering fresh scent of antiseptic. The touch of each doctor and dermatologist was different: some of them pinched the rough skin of my arm, while others traced, prodded, or skimmed. This particular visit was different, but not in a way that was technical; this was the day I finally got an accurate diagnosis.

The snaking patch of hyperpigmentation growing down my chai-toned arm didn't just seem to be a medical anomaly that took one too many years to properly diagnose, rather one undone stitch in a growing sweater of confusion. From eight years old up until the ripe age of a middle schooler, my dermatologic misdiagnosis followed me around in the forms of treatments left ineffective and tubes of ointment left wrung empty. But for me, it prompted questions. So, when I left that doctor's office that day, I sought to answer them—Google searches, research papers, and all.

What I came to learn was unsurprising, but wasn't easy to digest, nonetheless. Discrimination can be subtle, but rooted within systems. Minorities, women, and people of color are simply understudied. The American Association of Medical Colleges writes that the mortality rate for skin cancers in people of color is so high (despite higher protection from melanin) is because doctors are unable to diagnose them. Medical textbooks, datasets, and research often leave out essential populations, making misdiagnosis and late-stage diagnosis all too common.

In high school, as I became more engrossed with science and research, I came around learning about Henrietta Lacks, the Tuskegee Trials, and the landmark cases that transformed scientific ethics. I learned of injustice in the forms of all things unethical that have now transformed into something close to an unintended exclusion. Healthcare is a human right; being included ethically, safely, and equitably into the research that develops, innovates and informs medical decisions is as well. I can't stand to see people, like me, left undiagnosed and untended to, just because of the color of their skin.

Through my own experience as a patient, I learned the necessity of inclusion, not only on an everyday basis, but in the realm of science, technology, and innovation. As an aspiring scientist myself, I try to make inclusive spaces, whether it's through Sciology—a summer camp I founded intending to bring communities of students together to learn more about STEM—or through my own research escapades. Through my research projects, I've developed machine learning models on diverse datasets, allowing for equitable melanoma diagnoses and diabetes risk predictions—peer-reviewed research I've come to present in front of a global audience at the International Conference of Data Mining. As an aspiring bioengineering major and advocate for medical equality, my work won't just stop there. I want to live in a world where everyone receives the care they deserve, and with the help of others, I intend to create it, one research paper at a time.

Ayesha serves as captain of her school's Science Olympiad and Speech & Debate teams, president of the Model UN team, and News Editor of the school newspaper. Outside the classroom, she plays viola in the chamber orchestra and founded Sciology Summer Camp, a free initiative that provides STEM education to middle school students and that she leads each summer. In college, Ayesha plans to major in bioengineering.



Sophie Frissore

Grade 12, Aurora High School

The photos on my wall didn't change, so why did we? I stared at them one night, sitting on my bed, trying to remember when they stopped asking me to hang out with them. We all smiled in the photos, drumsticks in hand, arms around each other like nothing had changed. I felt angry. Angry that they were together without me, angry that I didn't know what I did wrong, angry that I couldn't have seen this coming when making choices that changed my adolescence. I didn't realize then that this was what being excluded could look like. Quiet. Unspoken. Easy to deny, but impossible to ignore.



Quitting band seemed like a choice I wanted, a chance to focus on my classes, but it came with a cost I couldn't predict. My best friends, who were still involved in band, drifted over the summer leading into junior year, and suddenly, I had nobody to start the school year with. I wasn't excluded or mocked, but the quiet absence, the inside jokes, the moments I no longer understood, were enough to make me feel erased. These feelings revealed how subtle exclusion can be, even if unintentional, and how deeply it hurts.

As the quiet winter alone flew by, I realized I didn't want anyone else to feel the way I did that summer. The self destructive behavior from my overthinking destroyed me. Because of this, I took it upon myself to create Self Care Club, a judgment free space where everyone is welcome. Athletes, musicians, students often called "awkward" or "different" have all come together to practice mindfulness and be proud of their individuality. By creating this club, I've watched students who stayed quiet finally speak up during an activity, or others who spent lunches alone laugh with new friends made in the club. These moments are proof that inclusion should be a value in our society. It's lived, felt, and transformative.

Creating my own club shaped my vision of the world I want. I want a society where people aren't erased, where differences are celebrated instead of feared, and where everyone has a chance to be seen and heard. Self Care Club is my step toward that vision, a space where kindness creates ripples that reach further.

Looking forward, I want to continue building inclusive spaces wherever I go. Whether making new friends at college, volunteering to fill my life with gratitude or taking a leap and starting new, inclusive communities like Self Care Club, I want to make sure no one feels lost like I did. Every conversation, every shared laugh, every moment someone feels seen in Self Care Club reminds me that change starts small but can grow into a world where everyone has a place.

The photos are on my wall, accompanied by twinkling string lights and colorful clips. The difference is that when I look at them, I feel proud that my anger turned into a beginning, and that choosing inclusion can keep someone from disappearing.

Sophie holds a black belt in taekwondo and is a competitive dancer, training six days a week for four hours each day. She has perfect pitch and has been playing the drums since the age of three. In addition, she plays the guitar, ukulele, and piano, and she enjoys singing. Her favorite subject in school is English, and she has loved reading since she was young. Sophie's mother is from England, and she enjoys traveling abroad to visit her family. So far, she has visited five different countries. Sophie also enjoys volunteering and completed 53 volunteer hours during the first semester of her senior year alone. She will be attending the University of Cincinnati, where she plans to major in psychology and minor in music, with the goal of pursuing graduate school to become a licensed music therapist.

Manasvi Gurajala

Grade 11, Solon High School

An elderly man with ragged clothes sprawled on the sidewalk, one hand loosely wrapped around a bowl filled with change. A nearby boy nudged his mother, asking for coins to donate, but he only received a dirty look.

"Ignore him. If he wants money, he can work for it like us."

At eight years old, my heart ached. Why was there a lack of empathy? Was the woman right—was his outcome deserved? The man was one of many across the city of Cleveland, lying on the rough, cracked sidewalks with dwindling hope for housing as the skies grew grey and compassion grew scarce.

For the 771,480 unhoused Americans, this is the reality of their everyday lives: Instead of receiving understanding or empathy, they're left with scorned looks and ceaseless despair. Yet after further research, my heart panged as I learned that for many homeless Americans, their outcome isn't for a lack of trying; despite up to 53% of the homeless being employed and 32,000 of them having served our country, homelessness persists. Furthermore, with the rise of anti-homeless infrastructure, a low federal minimum wage, and the Supreme Court's 2024 decision criminalizing sleeping on the ground, the legal policies in place are stacked against them.

For many Americans, bias against the homeless isn't due to hate; but rather, a lack of awareness about the factors that fuel homelessness. I couldn't entirely eliminate hate against the homeless, but I could treat them with compassion and help advocate against policies that perpetuate homelessness.

Consequently, this past summer, I decided to take action as an intern at the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless. There, I gained a greater sense of knowledge of what's fueling Cleveland's housing crisis, diving into the jargon of subprime loans, gerrymandering, and redlined districts that stop people of color from equitably accessing housing—obstacles that many boil down to simply "not working hard enough."

Hearing the stories of how Clevelanders ended up homeless, I couldn't shake the feeling that these issues were entirely solvable through effective policy. Therefore, I cooperated with the team's direct action initiative through compiling people's stories about homelessness and statistics into an art piece that was presented at the annual Cleveland Housing Summit. We concluded by meeting with Representative David Joyce's team, urging him to fight against impending Department of Housing and Urban Development cuts, and pleading the case of equitable housing for future generations.

When I walk through the streets of Cleveland today, little has changed in the past eight years. Alleys continue to serve as home for disillusioned Americans, and grassy areas on road cutoffs still host encampments. But internally, my outlook has shifted. I will continue to reach out to local legislators advocating for the homeless, continue to push for compassion, and continue to fight for equity.

The homeless man I saw all those years ago had a face devoid of hope; but I pray my actions will help restore light to the eyes of those who have lost it.

Manasvi enjoys reading, writing, and baking, and has played tennis for the past seven years. She loves to travel and has visited 17 countries. In school, she serves as captain of her Congressional Debate team and is actively involved in student council and Future Business Leaders of America. With a strong interest in politics, economics, and advocacy, Manasvi plans to study Economics and Political Science in college. She hopes to focus on racial inequities in housing, environmental racism, and racial bias in artificial intelligence, with a particular interest in researching policy proposals and practical solutions to address these challenges.



Liam Hernandez

Grade 12, Aurora High School

When you think of hate, what is it you picture? Is it the unfair treatment of African American people? Discrimination against Asian people, Indian people, or Hispanic people? All of those marginalized communities, among others, face barriers to equal opportunities due to deeply ingrained prejudices and stereotypes. While these social biases are well-documented, one group often overlooked in discussions of hate is the elderly.

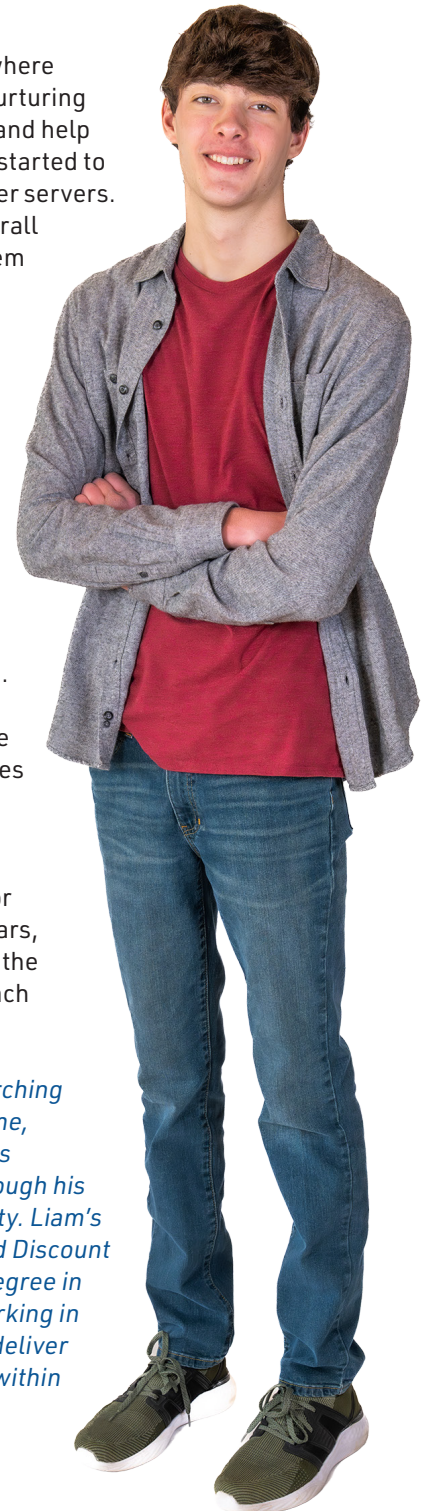
I am very familiar with this group, because I work at a senior citizens home. This is a place where people nearing the end of their lives reside so they can have supervision, assistance, and nurturing when they need it. My job is to take their orders, serve them their meals, clear their tables, and help out with any other minor problem they may have. I felt as though I fit right in, and gradually started to make some real connections with the folks. It's all too sad that I can't say that about the other servers. I have heard their degrading talk behind the elderly's backs, jokes at their expense, and overall insensitivity to their age for almost two years now. The caregivers aren't any better, and seem to care more about their phone and other employees than the residents.

One moment in particular stands out to me, when I was setting my tables after dinner service had finished. I noticed a resident at a nearby table, sitting in her wheelchair. She was the only one left in the dining room, as dinner had ended 30 minutes ago. Her caregiver was off somewhere else, not being there for a resident in need. I felt a wave of sadness rush over me, and could almost touch the shroud of loneliness that surrounded her. I set down my tablecloth, walked over to her, and took a seat. We talked and talked; about my life, her life, baseball, food, parents, whatever came up. She seemed to gradually brighten as we conversed, and I knew exactly why. This was the connection she had been yearning for.

So many people disregard residents and their needs, when they deserve the most attention. People such as these servers, nurses and caregivers see them as a burden and a hassle. That's far from what they are. After living a long life, these seasoned individuals deserve the best care, best treatment, and the best respect. They often don't get that, and in communities all around, efforts need to be made. Just little things like sitting down and talking, playing a game, or saying hi can make all the difference.

We will all be old at some point, which provides an amazing opportunity to eliminate a factor of hate worldwide. Our elders have all earned a life of peace and fulfillment in their later years, and should be celebrated rather than dismissed. By fostering compassion and kindness for the elderly, we help ensure that we too will be treated with the dignity we deserve when we reach that stage of life.

Liam has played the trumpet since fifth grade and enjoyed four years in the high school marching band. Business and digital art classes have been his favorite to take in school. In his free time, Liam works on digital design projects using Adobe Photoshop and Adobe After Effects. He is especially passionate about film and hopes to pursue a career in a movie-related field. Through his involvement in National Honor Society, he actively volunteers at school and in his community. Liam's work experience includes positions at Independence Village, a senior living community, and Discount Tire. In the fall of 2026, he plans to attend The Ohio State University to pursue a business degree in marketing or advertising. He also plans to minor in Digital Media to further his dream of working in the film industry. Liam aspires to create short films that spark creativity, inspire hope, and deliver meaningful messages that resonate on a deeper level. Excited by the endless possibilities within cinematography, he is eager to explore, innovate, and bring his ideas to life.



Autumn Ladner

Grade 12, Aurora High School

The black, permanent, stained ink was engraved onto my great-grandmother's skin, serving as a constant reminder of her experiences. In 1938, during WWII, my great-grandmother was forcefully taken from her family in Wierzbowce, Poland, at the age of 12 and forced into a work camp created by Adolf Hitler. When she arrived, she was given a number that stripped her of her identity. Rather than being treated like a real person, she and everyone else were treated like foreign objects. She and others in the camp were taught to hate themselves and praise the "superiors" who ran the camp.

Moreover, my great-grandmother emphasized that she and other people in the camp were given little food because they were seen as "unworthy". Many people in the camp suffered from malnutrition. Food was seen as a privilege they did not deserve. During her time in the camp, my great-grandmother would often sneak out late at night to steal fruits and vegetables from the fields to help feed the prisoners.

As a child, hearing my great-grandmother share her experiences with us, a heavy, cold weight settled in my chest. It was devastating to realize she was treated more like a foreign object than an actual human being. Against her will, she was forced to work in the fields to harvest crops for a country that didn't respect her or the others working in the camps worldwide. Disgust and hatred bubbled up within me when reflecting on the actions taken by many prejudiced soldiers under Adolf Hitler's rule. It was from this point forward that I began taking action to disintegrate hatred and try to allow everyone's differences to unite us, not isolate us from each other.

Since that moment, the action I have chosen to take was to further my education. More specifically, study more about events where discrimination of any kind has occurred and how they arose. With the knowledge I have gained from my extensive research about the different instances of discrimination, I have chosen to pursue a career in the FBI. More specifically, I have chosen to major in Psychology in college and try to become an FBI Agent after obtaining my degree. Majoring in Psychology is important to me because I want to understand where prejudiced thoughts originate from in people's minds and how to prevent them. Becoming an FBI Agent will permit me to put an end to discrimination so that all people are respected.

As an individual, I have become more outspoken, cognizant, and informed about events occurring worldwide. I never want my great-grandmother's horrid experiences to be experienced by others. The courage and determination she exhibited during her time in the camp push me to fight for a world without discrimination. I imagine a world where differences are celebrated by all, rather than creating frustration and insecurities. In my future, I want to be a vigilant, outspoken leader who speaks up for equality for all in honor of my great-grandmother.

Autumn has lived in three different states. She graduated from kindergarten in Ohio, completed elementary school in North Carolina, finished middle school in Texas, and later returned to Ohio, where she will graduate from high school. Autumn is passionate about running, having completed her first half-marathon last year and running cross country for her school team. She also loves to read all genres of books and hopes one day to travel to Poland to see her grandmother's birthplace. As the Internal Vice President of her school's National Honor Society, she helps organize volunteer events and encourages member involvement. Service is especially meaningful to her, as she believes strongly in giving back to her community and strives to volunteer at least once each week. In the future, Autumn hopes to become an FBI agent after attending college and majoring in Psychology and Criminal Justice. Her ultimate goal is to create a world where people are treated equally, not judged for their differences, and where everyone feels valued and respected.



Madeline Roisman

Grade 12, Saint Joseph Academy

At eight years old, I traversed through the clinical sliding doors of a nursing facility for the first time in my life. Armed with nothing but the mop of curls on my head and a muted smile, I was ecstatic to visit my grandmother, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. I didn't know much about the illness she was battling, but I loved her deeply and just wanted to spend time with her. I still remember the slightly dated decor plastered on the walls and the unlimited plastic pudding machine, but nothing that struck me as negative in any way. I walked out of there that night thrilled at having seen my grandmother for the Thanksgiving holiday, and assured that she was in good company for her few-week long stay.

At ten, I overheard a news broadcast my mother was listening to about elder care abuse in local independent living facilities. I was abjectly horrified: vulnerable, older individuals were becoming victims of verbal and physical abuse right near my home. How could a trusted adult do that? As a young kid, I knew nothing about the reality of nursing homes and ageism in the world around me, but I felt like I had just been slapped in the face with it. While my grandmother was only in that care facility for a short time, hundreds of thousands of other older individuals are there for months, or even years. I was horrified at the possibility of a person in power treating members of the elderly population in that way.

At fifteen, I began searching for my first part-time job. When a close friend of mine told me about an opening at an independent living facility, I knew that it was the perfect place for me. After being accepted as a server, I spent several hours a week serving meals to many residents in my section. However, it was not the act of providing food that kept me coming back week after week, it was the relationships that I built with residents, forged through mid-meal conversations. I knew that I was not able to single-handedly end ageism in the world, or the injustices that older individuals face within skilled nursing homes. The smiles on the faces of those I was closest with whom I conversed with daily, though, were part of me working towards the future I want to live in. I aspire to build a world where all forms of injustice are eliminated, and refuse to accept a reality where I can do nothing but idly stand by.

At seventeen, I have learned the true power of my voice. Whether it is through co-leading volunteer meetings at Youth Challenge or interning at an immigration law firm, I've found ways to be a positive agent for systemic change in my community. In order to eliminate hatred and bigotry in the world, a worldwide effort is required, and I will not hesitate to contribute to that future.

Madeline enjoys solving crossword puzzles, reading, and attending concerts with her friends. Her favorite subjects in school are government and history, and she is heavily involved with the school newspaper, The Jaguar Beat, where she serves as both co-editor and reporter. She is also an Academy Ambassador, a peer tutor, and a four-year member of the tennis team. Outside of school, she volunteers as co-leader of the Youth Challenge Volunteer Committee and serves as the Assistant Director for the Holy Trinity School musical. As a devoted fan of Cleveland sports (and the Washington Commanders), Madeline longs to spend her summer nights watching the Guardians at Progressive Field. In the future, Madeline aspires to become an immigration lawyer dedicated to improving the lives of others. After a summer internship in the field, she was inspired to combine her passion for government and international relations with meaningful advocacy to make a positive impact on the world.



Austin Rule

Grade 11, Aurora High School

We were just twelve and riding bikes in the neighborhood, as we had done nearly every day during the summer. My best friend and I were simply enjoying our lives, thinking that the world was a small and safe place to be. We were coming back from the park after a warm and sunny day that felt completely ordinary at the time. We encountered an older couple on the road walking toward us. We slowly went around them as they stared at us strangely. And that's when it happened. The old lady looked at my friend and said the one word I had never thought I'd hear in real life. The word that I had only heard in movies from hundreds of years ago. The word I didn't know much about, other than the fact that it was associated with hatred. This was my best friend that I had grown up with; we shared the same interests, hobbies, and sense of humor. We had so much in common, except for one thing: our skin.

I was in shock and couldn't fathom the reality of what I had just heard. Meanwhile, my friend had continued to pedal forward unfazed and in silence. This was the moment I realized that she had experienced this type of hatred more often than I had known. I was shocked that she had already been forced to learn how to tolerate it. The one tiny characteristic that differs between us allows me to feel safe, while she is targeted because of it.

What upsets me the most about that day is not only the racism itself, but the fact that I stayed silent. I didn't stand up for her as I should have. I was scared and unsure of what to do. However, I learned through my silence on that day that hatred will only get worse the more people stay quiet.

Since then, I have made an effort to be different. I have learned that stopping hatred does not require extensive work from one individual, but rather a small group effort from everyone. It's as simple as speaking up when your friend makes a racist joke or comment. It can be as simple as treating everyone with respect, no matter who they may be. Ultimately, eliminating bigotry and choosing open-mindedness is one of the most powerful ways to defeat hatred.

That day on the bikes changed my perspective on the world and how I can play a role in shaping it. I cannot change my silence on that day, but I can change how I will act in the future. It's not always about confronting, but rather making sure that such hatred doesn't get overlooked. I hope that through my actions, I can be a part of the generation that creates a world where everyone is seen as human.

Austin enjoys running, watching sports, and spending time with friends. At school, he is active in the National Honor Society, Interact Club, and Student Council. He also runs on the school track team and volunteers with his church youth group. Austin plans to attend college in his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, where he hopes to study business or finance with the goal of starting his own business in the future.



Asher Sullivan

Grade 11, Shaker Heights High School

Since as long as I can recall, my understanding of the world was dualistic, in terms of right or wrong, all or nothing, one or the other. Picture books and Disney movies were so straightforward, and I loved the fact that the villains were evil through and through, and the heroes completely virtuous. However, when I was 11 years old, that all changed.

One chilly morning, when I was walking into the same restaurant I had been countless times, eagerly looking forward to the usual Saturday morning breakfast with my family, a newspaper nestled inside the glass case of its dispenser outside the door stopped me in my tracks. The headline read, "Another Black Man Killed by Police." My whole worldview was flipped upside down. I had so many questions and none of the answers my parents offered gave me any clarity. How could an officer, someone who is meant to protect and keep us safe, kill someone else? I suddenly realized that the world was not as simple as I thought and people were not all good or all bad. I lost my appetite that day, but gained a new understanding of the world.

Instead of thinking in black and white, my new perspective became gray. This dynamic color represents intrigue, nuance, neutrality, paradox, and endless possibilities. Gray is where differing opinions and ideas converge, where boundaries blur. Thus, the term "gray area" refers to the unknown, new, unexplored areas of life that don't conform to a category or an existing set of rules. I like to think of it as an unformed piece of clay, waiting to be molded into anything its sculptor desires.

At a time of so much divide and polarization, full of strong biases and opinions, I believe there is value in finding the gray for everyone. Too often discussion turns into debate, people listen with the intent to argue instead of to understand. To solve these problems and better understand one another, I urge people to lean in with curiosity to the world of gray. This means hearing and listening to another person's perspective, respecting their way of seeing the world, and finding common ground. However, it's peculiar to me how many people seem unfamiliar with this concept, so I strive to share the wonders of nuance with everyone, using my platform as the leader of my school's club on race relations to pass on transformative tools. In this role, I also have the opportunity to review and choose future applicants and leaders, train club members, and go into classrooms leading presentations and activities to encourage discussions and introduce curiosity.

Ultimately, finding nuance in the world has now become natural for me, almost like a habit. Sure, it can still be uncomfortable at times, but I embrace the uneasiness, the beautiful complexity of humans, and it is often when I grow the most. In black and white, I find answers. In gray I find questions, and that is where understanding truly begins.

Asher plays soccer and lacrosse, runs track, and is active in numerous school clubs. He co-founded the American Red Cross Club, leads the Student Group on Race Relations, and volunteers with Youth Ending Hunger. He enjoys skiing, snowboarding, hiking, watching sunrises and sunsets, and spending time with friends. An avid traveler, Asher has visited numerous national parks and ventured to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand on service and cultural immersion trips. He loves trying new experiences, whether learning a sport, visiting an unfamiliar place, or tasting unique foods – he has even tried a tarantula! Asher is considering studying business, math, or computer science in college, and hopes to travel the world and live life to its fullest.



Ann Varghese

Grade 12, Aurora High School

The sun was beating down my back, sweat was pooling under my armpits, and I was irritated that I forgot my sun protection hat—the big one with the enormous brims that made any onlooker unable to see my face. It was my brother’s soccer game. Instead of enjoying it, I wanted to go home. Looking back, that clumsy start to the day felt like foreshadowing to what was going to happen.

Per usual, my brother would spend time with his friends after the game, and my mother and I would stand off to the side talking. That’s when a young girl came up to us and said, “You guys smell like Indians. You know... the curry smell.” I was shocked, but soon anger replaced that feeling.

I had experienced racial microaggressions before, and I never said anything. I have been called a “curry muncher.” I had been side eyed multiple times for bringing Indian food. I had been asked how I could ever visit such a dirty country, and withstand that “curry” smell. And, every time, I sat there quietly, taking it in, and saying to myself that it’s no big deal. But those comments quietly changed me. I stopped bringing Indian food, or if I did I’d quickly close the lid so the smell wouldn’t spread. These small comments made me shrink my identity, and be shameful of my heritage.

But this time was different. I spoke up.
“What you said wasn’t nice.”

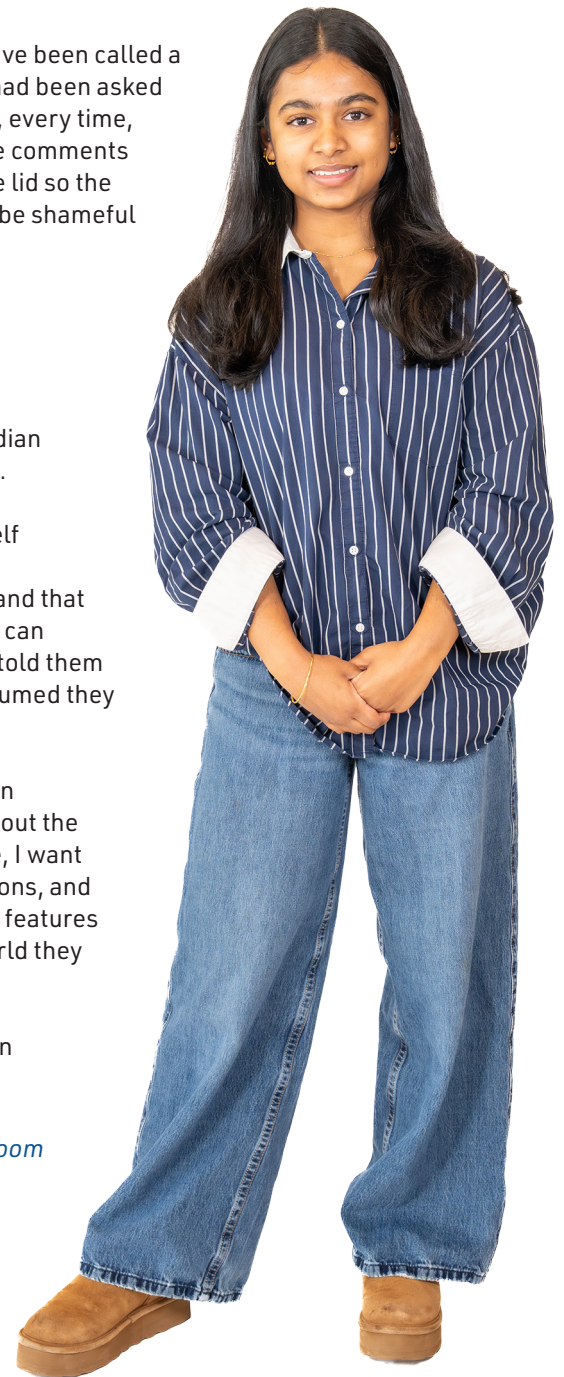
That was all it took. One small sentence. The child’s face went still. They weren’t used to being corrected. Standing up for myself, my family, and the countless Indian immigrants who imagined themselves becoming white was extremely liberating.

That one small step I took made me realize how powerful speaking up for yourself can be. If you don’t speak up for yourself, who will? From then on, I became confrontational. Recently, someone told me my English “was not good enough” and that I should go back to India, all because I mispronounced a word. A mistake anyone can make regardless of skin color and ethnicity. For the second time, I spoke up and told them how insulting it was. Watching their face turn bright red was satisfying; they assumed they could get away with it.

That realization shaped the world I want to live in: a world where people question stereotypes instead of accepting them. In the future, I hope to educate others about the lies that surround India through confrontation or small talk. When I go to college, I want to join South Asian identity clubs that celebrate our festivals, culture, and traditions, and encourage friends of all backgrounds to join too. I want people to look past body features and appreciate others for who they are and be amazed by the diversity of the world they live in.

Most importantly, I will continue to speak up. Even when it’s uncomfortable. Even when it is small. Because that’s how change begins.

A self-described bookworm, Ann owns over 200 books and dreams of having a room dedicated entirely to them. She loves to travel and experience different cultures and cuisines. While she hopes to visit every country in the world – especially Thailand and Sri Lanka – she particularly cherishes trips to her motherland of India, where she treasures time spent with her extended family. Ann’s favorite subjects in school are biology and chemistry, and she plans to become a doctor after attending university as a pre-med neuroscience major. At college, she hopes to join clubs focused on dance and medicine, learn pottery, and build meaningful friendships that create lasting memories.



Grade 6-10 Finalists:

Samipa Patel **Grade 10, Solon High School**

“Go back to India!”

My head snapped back. What? There was a hand pointing at me. Not an adult, not someone my age, but that of my five-year-old camper. What - did I hear him right? I was speechless, unease rising in my stomach. What do you say when a little kid is racist?

A woman, flustered, stepped in before I could even think to act. The rest blurred into my spiraling thoughts.

I was silent.

He must have learned it somewhere. Did he mean it? Did he even know what it meant? How else would he connect the dots, apply it to an Indian? Or was he just repeating what he must've heard many, many times?

I froze that time. Of course I've known about racism, I've learned about its history, how to recognize it. But no one ever tells you how to stop it. What can you even tell a five-year-old?

When I was his age, I hardly saw any difference between me and my peers, let alone who was what color and what that meant. To me, skin color could be any of the jumbo-96-count pack of crayons. The people who turned their noses up at my food only confused me, because they had never tasted it. That childlike innocence is the most precious, their unwitting actions reflecting a lack of stereotypes and stalwart beliefs.

Yet as I matured, I saw the gaps in society that I missed in naivete. As a gymnast, I tried to conform where I wasn't accepted. I wondered if there was something wrong with me, if it was my fault I was treated differently. I endured laughter and pointed fingers for far too long, leaving only after being yelled at by coaches meant to teach and protect. I only regret not making that decision sooner, falling back on silence instead of confronting them myself.

Racism only ingrains itself into society because people let it. There is a vast gap between a colorblind world and an equal world; a world where issues are ignored and swept under the rug versus a world where equality prioritizes and protects. Three out of four people of color experience racism in their lives, yet it becomes commonplace, carving unimaginable wounds under different names.

As my inbox fills with worse news day by day, my story is certainly the best of many. But I refuse to tolerate racism in any of its forms. That woman stopped him then, but I should have spoken up. There won't always be someone there to step in.

I want to live in a world in which even implied racism ends conversations. Rather than regretting my silence, I want to be that person with the courage to speak up when I see exclusion, intervene when kids are singled out for their food or clothes or hair, and inspire others to stand up for themselves. Silence stands by, letting discrimination grow. Next time, I'll choose to speak up.

Samipa enjoys traveling and learning about the world, and has visited nearly 30 national parks across the United States. She is deeply interested in medicine, anatomy, and physiology, and has earned numerous state and national awards in Science Olympiad, where she also serves as a test writer and middle school coach. In addition, Samipa competes in Speech and Debate, specializing in International Extemporaneous Speaking, and coaches middle school students in the same category. Samipa plays the violin and piano, is an avid ice skater, and has placed at regional and state levels in JustWrite Ohio and previously competed in Power of the Pen. As an aspiring medical professional, she hopes to become a surgeon and has already completed multiple medical courses at Cuyahoga Community College and Kent State University.



Younes Tajik

Grade 10, Natividad Pagan International Newcomers Academy

In Afghanistan, there are no women's rights or children's rights, and people live very difficult lives. There, I saw hatred within my own family. My father hated us because we were Christians. He hit my mother in front of us. He told my mother she had to convert to Islam or he would turn her over to the state and they would execute her. Despite his threats, my mother stood strong. I am grateful to God for my compassionate courageous mother. She protected us from my father and took us to a new country to escape him.



We couldn't live as Christians in our own country because it's an Islamic country, and they treat Christians very harshly. Many Christians have been killed because of their beliefs; to save our lives, we had to leave our homeland. We lived in Turkey for eight years. Everything was going well in Turkey. I lived with my mother and my three other siblings, and we had a good time together every weekend. However, there was always something we feared: that my father would find us and harm us.

So, we had to immigrate again; this time to the US. Since we came to the US, everything is better. We can't spend time together on weekends because my mother is working; instead, we go to church and see our friends there, and sometimes they come to our house.

My father hated us and treated us very badly, but his bad treatment of us doesn't mean that we will also be bad or that we will treat others badly in the future. On the contrary, we learned to treat others well. I grew up in a Christian family and, as a Christian, I forgave my father because forgiveness is one of the most important tenants of my faith.

Forgiveness is the way to stop hatred. Praying for those who wrong us heals their hearts as well as ours. People who spread hatred are often those who have received little love in their lives. Standing by them and helping them overcome their hatred is the most important task we face as human beings. I believe God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, who said as he was dying, "Father, forgive them." That ultimate forgiveness teaches us how to act in our lives.

Stopping hatred is not just about me, it's about people I know today and people I will meet in the future. I serve as an altar boy at my church. I am on the altar seven days a week assisting the priest. After finishing high school, I plan to go to a monastery to become a priest and dedicate my life to God. I dream of having my own parish someday. It will be a very challenging life, but I believe God is calling me to help stop hatred by sharing the lessons of forgiveness I have learned. I will do this one person and one parish at a time.

Younes speaks five languages: Russian, Turkish, Aramaic, Persian, and Dari. He enjoys reading, as well as eating pasta and pizza. He is passionate about attending church and hopes to join the priesthood in the future. One day, he hopes to visit Rome to see its extraordinary churches and religious artifacts.

Eva Jones

Grade 9, Avon Lake High School

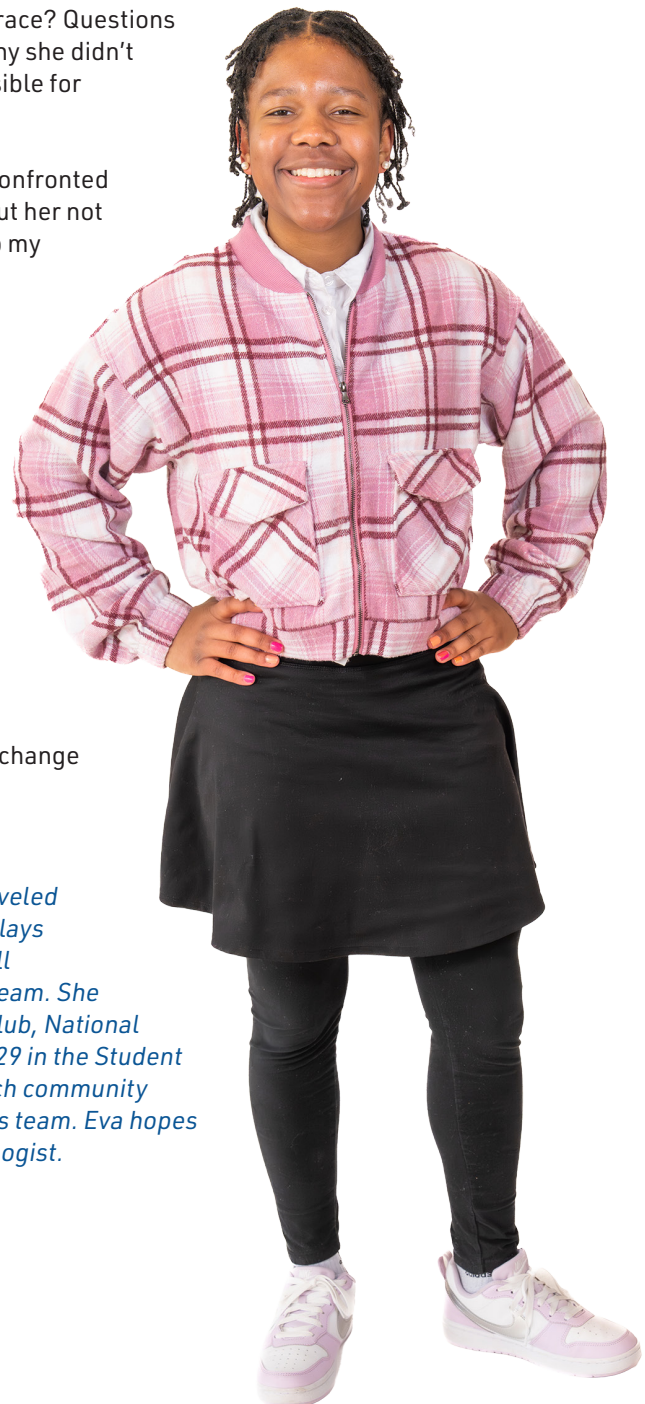
"I don't like Asians!" flew out of my roommate's mouth at summer camp and left a picture of confusion and frustration on my face. As a Black girl who has been judged based on her race, I know how it feels to experience prejudice. Whether White, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Indian or other, no one deserves to be mistreated based on the way that they were born. I have friends of various ethnicities. I assumed it would be fine when I introduced two of my friends at summer camp, but things did not go how I hoped. She began to act strangely and later told me, "I'm sorry if I was acting weird. I don't like Asian people". Later on in camp she was frustrated when a boy said that she looked like Mulan, an Asian Disney character. She yelled, "I'm not Asian!" Her frustration about Asian culture confused me. Why should she judge an entire race? Questions flooded my mind on why she would believe something like that. I asked her why she didn't like Asian people. My roommate stated that her parents held the race responsible for Covid-19. I countered; It's not their fault.

Her actions were harmful because she was wrongly judging an entire race. I confronted my roommate. After speaking with her I never heard any more comments about her not liking Asians. I continued to socialize with both of the girls. At the end of camp my roommate gave the girl who she hadn't liked before a going away present.

This moment shaped my vision for the kind of the world that I want to live in because I saw that misconceptions can be powerful. It is important to instill values in people from a young age through exposing people to diversity. I want to live in a world where people get to know others before they profile them based on what they see outwardly. I also want to live in a world where people correct each other's actions. My roommate didn't understand why she was wrong at first, but she later changed the way she thought.

I am class treasurer at my school. When I attend student council meetings, I work to represent diverse points of view and help reach a decision that is best for everyone. My basketball coach often says, "Do the little things right". This means that we should take pride in working diligently in everyday tasks. When we gradually work toward the final goal, eventually it will pay off. If we change our point of view, only then can we stop the hate.

Eva enjoys reading, caring for her houseplants, playing the piano, and has traveled to 38 states. At school, Eva is involved in numerous clubs and activities. She plays volleyball for both her high school team and the Northern Ohio Girls Volleyball Club, and she also competes on Avon Lake High School's JV girls' basketball team. She participates in concert band, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Pre-med Club, National Society of Black Engineers Junior, and serves as Treasurer for the Class of 2029 in the Student Council and Leadership Clubs. Outside of school, Eva contributes to her church community through Temple Baptist Church Youth Ministry and the church announcements team. Eva hopes to attend Howard University, study abroad, and pursue a career as a dermatologist.



Fatima Shah

Grade 9, Hathaway Brown School

"Ugh. Geometry is so pointless." Addison complained, expertly twirling her pencil on her fingers. It was 6th grade math class. "Hey, Nathan. Solve this for me." She shoved her math notebook onto Nathan's desk, and whispered something to her friend Lizzy, who sat beside her. Lizzy's mouth dropped open, and Addison giggled. I narrowed my eyes.

Lizzy leaned in towards Nathan, and exclaimed in a dramatic stage whisper, "She said she asked you because you're Asian."

Nathan, shocked, gestured towards me. "She's Asian too!"

Addison transferred her notebook from his desk onto mine in one swift motion, and looked at me expectantly.

I glared at her, and said "Addison. You can't just assume that if someone's Asian, then they must be good at math. What you said could be hurtful because it puts pressure on us to do well, which is unfair. We don't want to have to fit into your perfect standards."



I wish I could tell you that I said that. In reality, I had taken Addy's notebook and solved the problem for her without a word. But if I had the opportunity to change my reaction at that moment, that's exactly what I would've said.

Often, these moments are brushed off as jokes. They try to laugh it off, saying "it's just a joke" or "I'm just teasing." Regardless of intent, the impact still mattered. When I reflect on that day in 6th grade, I realize that by staying silent, I allowed a classmate to continue believing that stereotype was acceptable.

Growing up, I often heard the stereotype that Asians are naturally talented in math or science. While it may have been true that my classmates who were Asian generally got exceptional scores in those subjects, it's unfair to just assume it must be that way for anyone who's Asian. This stereotype can lead to unfair assumptions and pressure to perform well academically to fit into a certain standard. To Asian students who excel in the arts or athletics rather than STEM, being grouped into this stereotype could feel invalidating or discouraging.

As a Pakistani myself, it's true that Asian kids are subject to high academic pressure from a young age. But this doesn't mean that students of other ethnicities can't excel in STEM fields, nor that Asian kids are guaranteed to show talent in math.

The world we all want to live in today is one with no labels or stereotypes. I try to contribute to that world in small, but impactful ways: by speaking up against unfair comments, or supporting classmates who are excluded or stereotyped. Stopping hate doesn't always mean large actions. It just needs to start with the courage to say "That assumption is unfair" and choosing not to stay silent.

If Addison had known the real me, rather than the stereotype, then she would've known that I was more passionate about writing and English class. Oh . . . and that I had a B- in math at the time.

Fatima speaks four languages and enjoys listening to true crime podcasts, spending time with friends, and playing badminton. Her favorite subjects in school are biology and history. In addition to playing the viola, she is an active member of her school's speech and debate team. Fatima plans to major in Biology and Neuroscience in college and aspires to become a neurosurgeon, dedicating her career to helping patients affected by neurodegenerative diseases.

Reagan Eichenlaub

Grade 8, North Ridgeville Academic Center

"Write down one problem of yours on this piece of paper." my teacher says to the class. Hearing the extreme amount of writing broke a piece of hope within me. "Now what I need you to do, is crumple the paper up, and throw it anywhere you want and let someone else pick it up." These directions are very different from the average history lessons we usually do.



In a few seconds, paper was flying. I picked up the one closest to me, which looked like all the others. I recall opening that paper, which was like opening a chest of secrets. I remember seeing the words written on that sheet, each with a stroke of pain in the lead. I looked up, wondering which one of the people I have been side by side with since I was little was this broken. After staring at that paper, I was interrupted by my teacher.

"Now, as best as you can, unfold it until it has no folds or wrinkles. You could see people smoothing it out with their hands, running it over the side of the table, and even rolling a marker over it like a rolling pin. Everyone is getting frustrated at the fact that with all the resources we had in that small classroom, no one could fix it.

There were a few people who were very close, but you could still see the scars from the folds. I remember hearing a kid ask our teacher the point of this, and the teacher responded with, "We all crumpled this piece of paper, and never thought of the consequences. That paper recovered as best as it could, but there were still remains of all of the damage done to it. People are the same. You cannot forgive and forget about something, but you can accept and move on from it." Those words hit me harder than anything I've ever heard.

In that class, I was always surrounded by people but almost always felt isolated. In this moment, I realized someone finally understood what happened to so many of us. There are so many people who are still crumpled, or folded worse than me, but I - like many others - have found a way to unfold myself. I may still have scars from all of the crumpling, but they are healing, and they will continue to do so even if they never fully do.

I believe that me and others can find a way out. Forgiving and forgetting is a common cliché. It is untrue for many though. Nothing is truly forgotten, but it is possible to move on. Now, that we all have scars and folds from all of the crumpling, the need within me is to stop people from breaking something they think won't have consequences. We need to understand that while cuts do more damage, folding can still leave scars.

Reagan is a published poet whose work has appeared multiple times in print. She plays volleyball, runs track, and enjoys making a difference through her participation in National Junior Honor Society. Reagan loves exploring new places and embracing new experiences through travel, camping, and backpacking. After college, she hopes to move west and pursue a career as a sports medicine physician.

Karson Kirth

Grade 8, Independence Middle School

I realized how unfair the world was the moment right after I got diagnosed with type one diabetes. I remember walking into school after I was at the hospital for three days. Everyone was asking me what happened and was I ok, so I told them. Some were interested and wanted to help, but the other people just laughed and made fun of me. By the end of the day, almost all of my grade knew and most of them were asking questions and some were making fun of me. I did not really care what they were saying, but I realized that I have to live with this for the rest of my life.

Before that moment, I did not think that because I had a chronic disease people would look at me differently. It wasn't the comments; it was that people judge on things that they don't understand. Before I could even try to help them learn, they would just make assumptions. At that moment, I realized how exclusion felt. This wasn't because I was being left out of a game, it was being left out of something because of the disease I can't control.

At first, I just stayed quiet. I did not want to make the situation worse. In my eighth grade ELA, we had an assignment where we had to describe either internal or external scars. I chose to write about diabetes and everything I knew about my disease. I read it to a few of my classmates, and they realized what they were saying was about something completely different. Some even apologized and started asking me questions about my chronic disease.

Looking back, that moment shaped the way I wanted my life to look - one where everyone tried to understand before judging others. A world where differences didn't push people away but gave chances to learn something new. I don't want anyone else, whether they have diabetes or something different, to feel smaller because of who they are or what their body needs.

Now, I try to speak up for anyone who is being bullied for things they can't control. I correct people when they talk about myths about diabetes. I try to help others that feel less than the average human being. In the future, I want to be the person that makes these conversations normal - someone who uses their own experiences to help others.

Diabetes taught me that unfairness doesn't always look big or dramatic.

Sometimes it's a classroom assignment. But those moments matter because it can push you to choose silence or choose change. I choose change. And I hope that piece by piece I can build a world where one feels less ashamed of what makes them different. I just want to make it clear that just because someone is different does not mean they want it brought to their attention all the time. I plan to volunteer to work with Breakthrough T1D as a youth ambassador.

Karson enjoys traveling, spending time with his family, and being outdoors for numerous activities such as riding his dirt bike, swimming, playing baseball, snowboarding, and go-karting. At school, Karson serves as a leader in the Where Everyone Belongs program, helping welcome new students and fifth graders to Independence Middle School. After being diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 2024, he was selected to serve as a Youth Ambassador, where he helps raise awareness about the condition and advocates for those affected by it. Karson plans to attend Cuyahoga Valley Career Center during his junior year of high school to learn a trade he is passionate about. He also intends to continue his advocacy efforts, supporting individuals living with Type 1 diabetes and promoting research toward finding a cure.



Kylie King-Woods

Grade 7, Hathaway Brown School

“Can I touch your hair?”

This seems like such a simple, polite question. Yet to me, it was a reminder that others saw me as different. What made me different drew attention before I did. It was like I was being examined, not understood.

After hearing it repeatedly, it started to feel like the question followed me. During class, in hallways, at lunch. I felt invisible because people ignored my boundaries, but also exposed because I felt like I couldn't stop it. When I wanted to say “no,” guilt swallowed my voice before the words reached my lips. Each request continuously tugged at my culture, seeing if I could hold on. I started to shrink as the power this question held grew.

I wondered if I was the problem. Why did I have such a hard time letting people touch my hair? I caught myself thinking a lighter skin tone and straight hair would solve my problems. As I looked in the mirror, I no longer saw a beautiful black girl, but a girl, uncomfortable in her own skin.

One day I heard that question again. Gentle, yet heavy with tension. “Can I touch your hair?” My neck shivered, my throat ran dry. My legs melted into the plastic chair beneath me. My hand traced the hem of my kilt, looking for comfort. When I finally said “No”, my body stiffened with unease. Still, her fingers began to comb through my dry curls, the coils caught in her grasp. Tears burned in my eyes. Not because she ignored me, but because I felt powerless. A simple sentence took up so much space in my life, reshaping how I see myself.

The absence of power was starting to fill me with anger. I was angry at friends, and myself. I wanted control over my body, my life. I explained this to my parents and how hopeless I felt, they suggested that I talk with my affinity group, BCA. The next day I walked into the room nervous. I listened as my friends told similar stories. For the first time, I saw that this question wasn't simple, but disrespectful.

So we decided to create a presentation. We worked tirelessly, putting our experiences into words, guilt into confidence. When it came time to present, I felt a shift. My voice was loud, my body light. The issue nearly vanished after that.

This experience taught me that being silent leaves room for disrespect, but using my voice creates room for understanding.

As I continue to grow, I remind myself of my voice. I cannot control the actions of others, but I can control what I do next. So when that question comes again, I no longer see it as a negative reminder of how I am different, but a reminder of how I am strong. I encourage my peers to do the same. By respecting boundaries, we can understand each other. And by using our voices, we can fill in the space of hate.

Kylie held her first art exhibition at just ten years old, selling over half of her pieces. Driven by a strong passion for learning, she actively participates in numerous clubs and activities, including Black Cultural Awareness, G.R.O.W., Science Research, Power of the Pen, Math Olympiad, Student Council, and Speech and Debate, where she competes in extemporaneous speaking. Outside the classroom, Kylie enjoys playing lacrosse, volleyball, swimming, and spending time with her friends and family. In the future, she hopes to travel throughout Europe and Asia and pursue a career in medical engineering. She plans to combine her strengths in writing, mathematics, critical thinking, and science to develop innovative solutions that improve lives, especially for individuals affected by poverty.



June Weaver

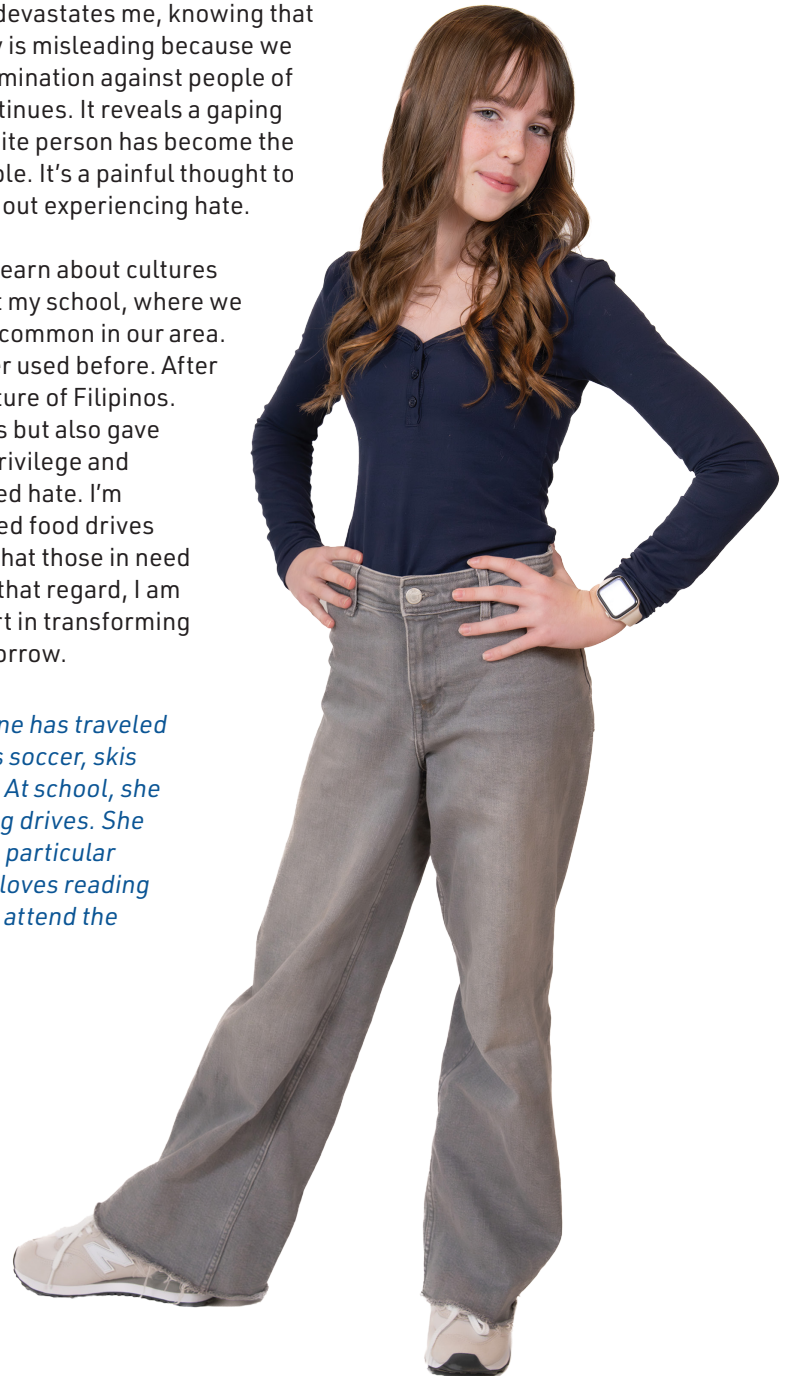
Grade 7, Garfield Middle School

Enveloped in the quiet night, darkness surrounded me. Cold winter air toyed with my hair. The only sound was rhythmic footsteps on the cement. It was my own voice that broke the silence. "I don't have anything to write about for my Stop the Hate essay. I've never really experienced any hate." My mother, who was walking with me, pondered this for a moment. Then she said a singular word that changed my whole perspective: "Exactly." I thought about this, and I realized it was true. I had never experienced the thing that has distressed people all over the world. But why was that true for me and not others? Why had I not experienced hate? That was when my mother's one-word answer registered with me.

As a white person in this world, I now understand that certain privileges come with my identity. A glaring example was made clear during the Hillary Clinton/Trump election. Many of my male relatives "couldn't bring themselves to vote for Clinton," simply because she was a woman. Even though they believed in what Hillary stood for, they didn't want a woman for president. This devastates me, knowing that many people across the country had a similar idea. Our country is misleading because we claim to be an advanced generation in a free country, yet discrimination against people of color, women, and individuals of different sexual identities continues. It reveals a gaping contradiction in our perceived values. Being a heterosexual white person has become the norm, and realizing this has made me feel somewhat responsible. It's a painful thought to think that many do not have the freedom to go through life without experiencing hate.

To combat this terrible reality, we must actively celebrate and learn about cultures that are unfamiliar to us. That's why I joined the cooking club at my school, where we create dishes from other cultures using ingredients that are uncommon in our area. Recently, we made ube cookies, a Filipino vegetable I had never used before. After preparing the cookies, we learned about the traditions and culture of Filipinos. This experience not only enriched my knowledge of other areas but also gave me a chance to appreciate different cultures. I plan to use my privilege and the opportunities that I have to help those who have experienced hate. I'm participating in H2O, the club at my school that organizes canned food drives and sets up donation bins filled with winter clothing to ensure that those in need receive warm meals and clothing during the colder months. In that regard, I am just an ordinary teenager, yet I am committed to playing my part in transforming the world we live in today into the world we want to live in tomorrow.

Born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City, June has traveled to several countries, including Colombia and Mexico. She plays soccer, skis regularly, and is currently learning to snowboard with a friend. At school, she participates in H2O, where she helps organize food and clothing drives. She especially enjoys her science and social studies classes, with a particular interest in Egypt and ancient civilizations. In her free time, she loves reading romance novels and spending time with friends. June hopes to attend the University of Michigan and pursue a career as a book editor.



Caleb Lehman

Grade 6, North Ridgeville Academic Center

It was a chilly winter afternoon, about a year ago, I was sprinting from specials, my hands sweaty and my head pounding, trying to not be tardy. Suddenly, an athlete stuck out his foot to trip me. I stumbled, staggered, and then I collapsed.



I slammed to the floor and my supplies slid everywhere. My face turned bright red as I heard scattered giggles. I struggled to try and pick up my pencils and coloring supplies, knowing that soon this embarrassment would be all over the grade. A random kid inched towards me. I thought "Oh great, they probably came over to see the show". To my relief they silently started to help me gather my stuff, helping me put my belongings back into my gaping supply pouches. My red face faded back to normal. Afterwards I asked the bully "Is that really how you want to live, a mean jerk who kids hate?" Then, I cleared out.

From that day on I have always tried to help kids who are bullied. I always help random kids pick up their scattered supplies into their gaping pouches. I always try to make a world that I want to live in and where everyone has a chance to be happy. At the end of the day I always ask myself, "Did I help someone today" and thankfully it's always yes.

Caleb is a twin who participates in both band and choir at school. He enjoys his math, art, and gym classes. Currently, he is preparing to test for his black belt in taekwondo and is an active member of Boy Scouts Troop 175. Caleb hopes to start a YouTube channel as he works toward a future career in filmmaking, with a focus on animation.

Peter Metoki

Grade 6, Hudson Middle School

Drip, splat, it was a rainy day. I was in my classroom, sitting near the window, watching the raindrops race down the glass. My teacher said, "Ok, class, today we will be playing a math workplace game."

A wave of excitement rippled through the room. "Yayy!" my classmates cheered. "Get into pairs," my teacher explained.

I watched as people shuffled, pushed, finding their partners. Then my friend shuffled over to me and said, "Want to be partners?"

His smile widened as I replied, "Yes!" We got our game board and hurried over to our table to start playing.

When we rolled the dice to begin, a boy came over and asked worriedly, "Can I join you guys?" I heard someone whisper "NO!" with tension in their voice next to me. It was my friend. In my head, I thought why? At the time I wondered why he got so mad when the boy asked to join? Maybe I shouldn't know he might be his enemy.

Since he was my friend, I didn't want to upset him, so I said "Sorry, no" to the boy who asked. I could hear the boy whisper, like a mouse, "Aww," as he went to ask the next group if he could join. After he left, I leaned on the cold glass of the window to listen to the rain and asked my friend, "Why didn't you want to play the game with Martin?"

He said, "Because Martin and I had an argument back in first grade, and he's never talked to me since. So now I figured he doesn't want to be friends anymore."

"Oh, that's too bad. Should we ask if he wants to be friends with you again and join our game?" I responded with wonder.

"No, he deserves to be alone, he hasn't talked to me for so long." My friend said with disgust.

"That's not fair to not give him a second chance," I answered.

Now, as I look back, I know how it feels to be left out and not have a partner, and the problem with Martin was unfair. Everyone in the world should be accepted and accept each other. I wish I could go back in time and I had spoken up and had done something to help Martin. Everyone in the world, including me, should accept everyone as their partners and into their friendships starting today.

Peter has been playing the violin since first grade and hopes to continue performing and participating in orchestra. In addition to his musical interests, he plays both soccer and baseball and enjoys volunteering at the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank. Peter has traveled to Japan with his family and is currently considering a future career in interior design.



Poetry Finalists:

Khloee Booth

Grade 8, Almira PreK-8 Academy

"You Did Succeed in Hurting Me"

You did succeed,
remember next time when I'm sitting alone,
it's probably because I'm lonely.
You pushed me around like your Barbie in your box.
You played dress up with my emotions,
throwing them onto the ground until one of them fits.
You took all of the light from my spark and left me dry.
All of those lonely nights I'd sit on my bed and just cry.
Months, weeks, and even days
I would try to compare myself to every little thing you would wear
even down to how you would do your hair.
So yes, you did in fact win but not for long, darling.

The times I thought that you were my friend,
the things we did together--
we always did the most
when we were close.
But the past is in the past
it's too far behind to dwell on it
I keep pushing forward no time to waste
But you never know your time or place,
So I keep a giggly smile on my cold-hearted face

It's okay, what you did, I forgot
I won't call you ugly or tell you to rot,
I'll just move on
Being kind and loyal to all my new friends
they treat me the best
I want them to be happy
Even if it takes all of me.

The things I can do to not be like you--
You pushed me to the edge rough
and still you don't think you did enough
When is it my turn to be happy ?
when will you not pray bad things on me?
When can you give me some respect?

Yes you did win and yes you did fool me good
and yes, you did succeed
you did succeed in hurting me.
But this is what I know
We don't have to discriminate.
We all need to stop the hate.

Khloee is kind and respectful, and she loves playing games with her brothers and spending quality time with her family. In the future, she hopes to take a family trip to California. Khloee plans to attend college to study cosmetology and culinary arts, with the goal of one day opening her own nail business.



Maya Bourguignon **Grade 8, Beachwood Middle School**

How did we get here?

Two hundred years ago,
the world was much different
Down in the south slavery existed
Color of skin dictated how you were treated
Basic respects?
Those were for "people"

Their lives would have been no reap but all sow
Voices were silenced
and with nowhere to go,
their stories unwritten,
washed away in the flow

How did we get here?

One hundred and fifty
was the number of years,
since even our children
had reason to fear
Education reserved for none but the high
And those below them
Watched their chances go by

Keep the poor people poor
And the rich people rich
The rules never changed
And yet they call it a fix

They say work harder
But the climb is too steep
Justice is waiting
Too tired to speak

How did we get here?

One hundred ago
Women's voices were whispers
Their dreams told "no"
their power restricted
Voting and working
Money and business
That was for men
Women raised children

They sewed, even served
But their futures were planned
Worth often measured
By a ring on their hand

How did we get here?

For even just fifty
Years in the past
Some love was a crime
Penalty: outcast
Whispers of love meant silence and shame
Risking it all,
Your friends and your name
Fear ruled the world
Still love dared to remain

This is how we got here.

Even though these are all in the past
They apply to us now
And we need to act
Take off the glasses, rosy in color
Confront all the wrongs, no turning back

If love is the answer
Then stop all the hate
The world is too full
With lines we create.

Maya has been dancing since the age of three and currently competes with Studio J Academy of Dance. Her favorite styles include contemporary, pointe, and lyrical. She enjoys assisting with younger classes and connecting with the students she mentors. At school, Maya enjoys biology and participates in Model UN. In her free time, she loves painting, sewing, baking, drawing, working with clay, and creating decorative projects for her room. A devoted animal lover, Maya has both a dog and a cat at home. She plans to deepen her understanding of animal care and conservation through a summer volunteer program at the zoo, with the goal of becoming a wildlife biologist who works with large mammals in captivity.



Christina Chhetri

Grade 8, Bolich Middle School



Dreams
I walk into gym
a girls already getting made fun of
this day it was her arms being skinny
They pushed her arm showing her
weakness
I hope, I hope, I hope

I walked into lunch
same girl
this time, it was because she ate too much
her full plate spoke more than those
bullies
I hope, I hope, I hope

Today was different
today she showed up in baggy clothes
nothing showing or even describable
I wish, I wish, I wish,

I hope she's okay
I hope she doesn't feel alone
I hope she knows I would've done the
same

I wish I said something
I wish she saw how it's okay to express
how you feel
I wish she knew it's okay to reach out for
help

I hope and wish someday I can make
these dreams come true
she may be me and I may be her
because most days, I wish "she" wasn't
me

Christina enjoys playing volleyball and painting, and she participates in band and the National Junior Honor Society at school. In the future, she hopes to attend The Ohio State University and pursue a career in law.

Farai Chiunda

Grade 8, Beachwood Middle School

Friend.
A simple word.
Some might say it's too mundane to be beautiful.
But step back.
Just for a minute.

Picture it.
How about a best friend?
They're always there. Always.
By your side, through thick and thin.
Laughter shared, smiles exchanged, whispers stolen.
Petty arguments, dismissive scoffs, sometimes plain
annoyance.
Those special moments, where you want to freeze time
and sit in the warmth of it forever and ever.

Or how about this?
You sit close to each other
simply resting in the contentment
that comes with one another's presence.

Not a word spoken.
Silence.

"Let it breathe," my dad would tell me.
The loud, joyful times are the most memorable.
They can be the most fun, too.

However, the best friendships
are the ones comfortable with silence.

But when does it become too much?

What was once a token of comfort becomes one of unease.
Disdain, if you will.

They begin avoiding your eyes.
Sitting with someone else.
Leaving you alone.

Why?

A group of people stand talking.
You know them.
You walk over.
They make room. Smile, too.

Across from you, your friend stares.
You look up. Meet their eyes.
Yours soften.
Theirs narrow.



With a scoff, they walk away. Not a word said.
One follows.
Then another.
Then another.
Friend follows friend, follows friend.
Leaving you alone.

When does it begin to sting?

You stare after them. They're laughing,
chatting.
Your fists clench, then loosen.
You feel the tears, but you don't let them come.
The days go by.
The weeks turn into months.

It used to be peaceful, that silence.
But now it's like an intense flood.
One that's always trying to pull you under.

You've been treading the waters as best you
can,
Hoping. Waiting. Praying for someone's
kindness.

But it's getting harder to stay strong.
Your fatigue begins to kick in.
You feel your legs tire.
You're sinking.
sinking.
sinking.

But wait...

A gentle voice breaks through the madness.

"Are you alright?" it asks.

You shake your head.
The tears flow like a river, deepening the
waters.

"No... I'm not," you say. "I'm not."

Gentle arms encircle you.
"It'll be okay," they say. "We'll get through it."

Slowly. Surely.
The storm clouds part.
The winds stop howling.
The waters lower.
The sun comes out.

Warmth.

In it, you realize that it only takes one person.
one person to love.
to empathize.
to be the bridge between hurt and healing.

Who?

A Friend.

Farai is Zimbabwean and actively participates in Model UN at school. She plays the cello in the school orchestra and the piano at home. She enjoys exercising, cleaning while listening to music, cooking, and styling her hair. Her favorite foods are Nutella and peanut butter, and she loves skiing and is currently learning to snowboard. In the future, Farai plans to attend the Wharton School to earn a degree in finance and economics. She hopes to open her own business one day and purchase her dream home.

Anna Kellermann

Grade 7, Ballard Brady Middle School



They call it all the same
"Oh you're Mexican right?"
I say "No, I'm Colombian"
But my words don't reach their mind.
"Oh, close enough."
My smile flickers as my heart sinks,
but I force it to return
They brush it off like it was nothing
But it wasn't nothing, it was
something
Something that they couldn't even choose to
remember.
The words they say
hurt
To be mislabeled
Is to not exist in their eyes
To be ignored
Is to not be respected
To be judged
Is to be shut behind closed doors,
A pain that no one hears
Just a little thing in their big world
But to be seen
Is to be respected with passion
To be heard
Is to be a sound with potential
To be understood
Is to be loved with certainty
You see words hurt more than some people
realize
They say what they say before they think
Words, hurt
But the same words can bring power instead
of pain
You just need to switch a few words.

Anna is bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English, and plays the violin and piano. She has one brother and two dogs, and her grandfather played professional football for the Cleveland Browns, Cincinnati Bengals, and Buffalo Bills. Anna especially enjoys her social studies and language arts classes. In the future, she hopes to travel the world and pursue a career in law.

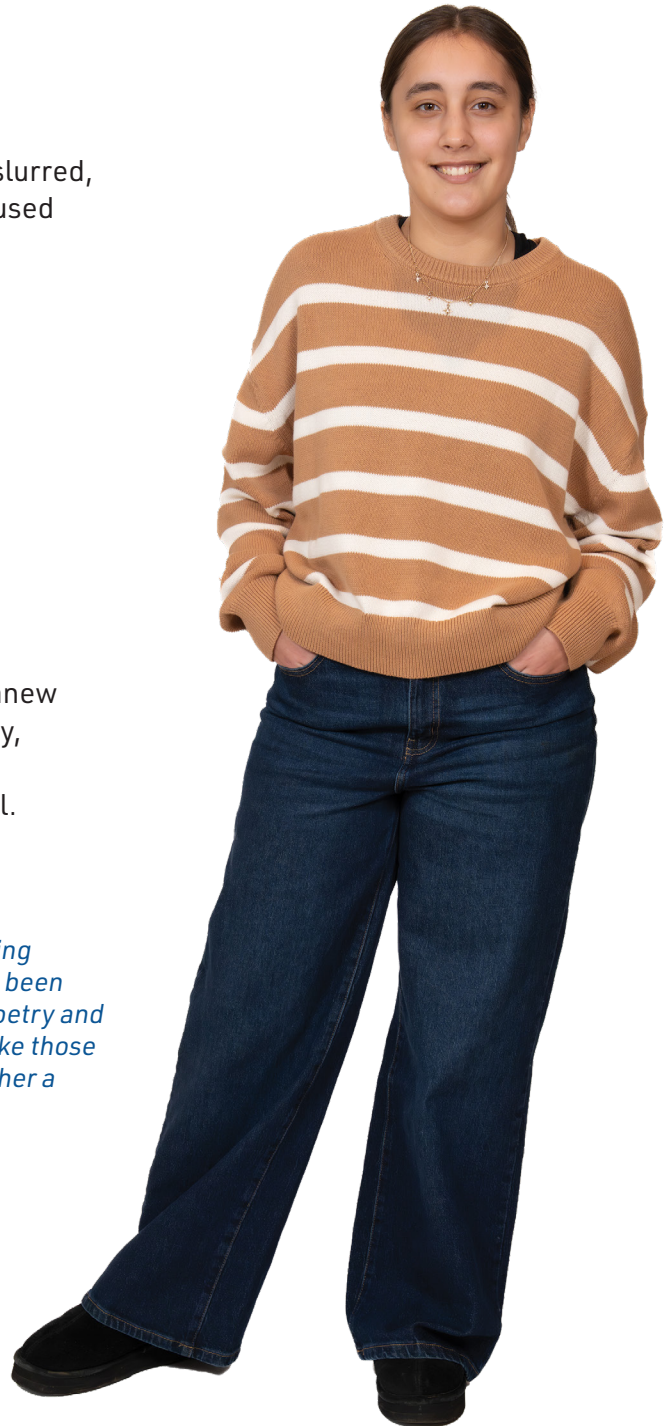
Ava Myers

Grade 10, Oberlin High School

"Instead"

In my peaceful world, I love myself
Instead of using a shaky blade across unmarked skin
Causing rivers, causing sin,
I'll be using a steady blade to make
something even the gods couldn't shake.
Instead of drinking away my emotions, causing
Everything to blur, with my words and thoughts slurred,
I'll be drinking something pure, my thoughts focused
And my emotions sure.
Instead of bottling everything inside
Waiting for angry thoughts to cloud my mind,
shame and guilt sticking to me like slime,
Wishing I would die,
But instead I'll talk about what's wrong,
Saying my thoughts and emotions
like a mature adult.
But above all else, I just want to be alive,
And love myself and thrive.
Expression isn't just in actions,
It's about Reflections too.
The first way to stop the hate is to love yourself anew
Because if you can't love yourself the healthy way,
You can't love others in the right way.
You can't fix something broken with a broken tool.
To stop the hate, you need to learn pure love.
Which can only be found from within one's self.

Ava is an honor roll student who plays multiple sports, including basketball, track, softball, and beach volleyball. She has also been involved in 4-H for ten years. Ava loves reading and writing poetry and has won state-level awards for her artwork. She hopes to make those who raised her proud and is considering a future career as either a travel doctor or a neurosurgeon.



Linh Nguyen

Grade 12, Aurora High School

"A Step Towards the Future"

She pulled her eyes at me.
Devastating deceit lashed across my face
This hate and shame, when will we be free?
Like a Trojan Horse, a disgrace—

Half-heartedly apologizing, claiming it was a joke
She gauged my reaction, my obvious frowning
Stunned into silence, I never spoke
Our relationship sank, a puppy in a pond drowning.

A friend, turned stranger, whispering lies
Another "joke" crushed me: "Don't eat him."
I concealed, I laughed, I built my guise
Classmates or media, these stereotypes swim

Those whispers grew louder...
Spreading rapidly, that dreadful disease
Ignited this flame of blame
Years of fragile unity froze in place
"All you people look the same,"
I will not stay quiet.

Ignoring their exaggerated sighs
I plan and think and organize
Sesame balls, rice cakes, egg rolls, and more
Hoping shared tables might open a door

Their eyebrows rise in surprise
A burst of flavor, foreign yet prized
I hear a click inside their mind
As rigid notions start to unwind

Pushing further, I choose to make a change
At cultural fairs, we meet and exchange
Vietnamese New Year, dragon dances
Small moments shift their stances

"Creating a world that I want to live in,"
She learns early what respect can be
Difference becomes curiosity
And education loosens adversity

Linh has been playing the piano for over ten years and frequently performs in concerts and recitals, as well as serving as an accompanist for orchestras, choirs, soloists, and other groups. She loves science, particularly biology and chemistry, and serves as a leader of her school's Pre-Med Society, a student-run club that helps students explore careers in medicine and healthcare. Linh also volunteers regularly through the National Honor Society, Interact Club, and Ensemble Club. In the future, Linh plans to continue performing on the piano and hopes to pursue a career as a pharmacist.



Zoe Pierce

Grade 11, Lakewood High School

"In Our World, There Are Children"

In our world, there are children in classrooms,
reading until they can't take another word,
writing letters in all arrangements,
finding their way in a world still so new.

They dread homework and projects,
and they dream of the sound of the last bell.

In our world, there are children in warzones,
grieving their destroyed routine,
attending crumbling classrooms,
learning about the harshness of the world.

They dread the sound of the last siren.
and they dream of dreading homework again.

In our world, some children have homes,
And after school, they can bathe in warm water,
and eat warm food,
and sleep in a warm bed.

They fall asleep and dream of worlds not like their own,
of aliens, or wizards, or creatures unknown.

In our world, some children who had homes,
but who now cannot have clean water to drink,
and go days without food to eat,
and have no safe place to sleep.



They lie in bed and dream of worlds not like their own, of comfort, or memories of their old home.

In our world, children are stumbling through grass,

knees bruised from playing in the park,

cheeks sore from smiling,

ribs aching from laughing,

heart full from living.

They point up at a plane, and chase after it,

dreaming of flying one day.

In our world, children are trudging on ruptured pavement,

knees scraped from lying in rubble,

cheeks wet from crying,

ribs ache from starving,

heart dull from living.

They point up at a plane, and run from it,

tears tear through dirt as they cry.

In our world, some children are treated as individuals.

Their ideas are entertained,

their feelings are acknowledged,

Their life is valued.

They are seen as gifts to the world,

And their teachers and guardians would agree, they are the future of the world.

In our world, some children's lives are treated as numbers.

Their very existences are treated as a statistic,

their survival is reduced to a 'political debate,'

Their life is placed under the land they stand on.

They are bombed, starved, and killed,

while the news outlets dance around the word genocide.

In our world, some children would've been friends,

If they hadn't been born in different lands,

not in the earth, or the skies, or the sea,

but in the ways they saw the world to be.

In our world, there are children, much the same as you and me.

They breathe the same,

they feel the same,

They bleed the same.

But in our world, some children think the world can do no wrong,

who only know the sunshine and the hope of days to come,

while other children pray for heaven before their lives are done.

Zoe loves all things music and enjoys playing the guitar and writing lyrics in her free time. She serves as vice president of her school's History Club, participates in the school dance group, and is passionate about volunteering. Zoe aspires to become a successful musician in the future.

Don'Nae Sanford

Grade 10, Walsh Jesuit High School

"Black Girl Magic"

My Black girl skin,
filled with the power of melanin,
Soft as velvet, strong as steel,
In every shade, a different part of history revealed
The black hearts of those who try to tell me that I'm not enough,
that I'm too much,
But I rise anyway, fueled by my own light,
Turning every doubt into a spark of power.
The black of the ink on paper,
my story etched in every line,
The part they tried to redefine,
Tried to erase, tried to take what's mine,
But my voice, my truth, my legacy remains untouchable.
Black of my hair, twisting and alive, free,
Standing upon my head as a crown,
Touching the sky, although it's not the limit,
Strength flowing from roots to tips.
Though now that you mention it,
My hair might be silk pressed if I please
The inconsistencies
Between your definition of black
and how I actually act,
Doesn't make me less black
It just makes me more me
The sun knows me.
It lives in my skin.
That's how it's always been
It follows my glow
You know how it goes
The light in a black hole of expectations
This is Black girl magic.
What, you doubted it?
The little bit I add to this world
This little bit of pizzazz
Smooth as jazz
This blueprint of mine
Laid out so those who come after me know
I am Black.
I am magic.
I am beautiful.
I am me



Don'Nae has a passion for languages, having studied Spanish for seven years and now learning Chinese. At school, she performs with the Harmony Gold show choir, spins with the Color Guard, and serves as marketing director for Students Across Cultures. She is also secretary of the Philanthropy Club and has proudly served as a Student Ambassador for the past five years. Through CenterStage Theatre, Don'Nae has participated in multiple productions and is a member of the Global Ignatian Scholars Program. Beyond school, she is actively involved in Upward Bound, the Strive Toward Excellence Program, Delta GEMS, the Akron Urban League, the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council, the Youth Advisory Board, and Girl Scouts. In her free time, she enjoys math, creative writing, drawing, baking, and cooking. Don'Nae plans to pursue a career as a pediatrician, where she hopes to support young people as they grow, help families feel heard, and make a meaningful impact that extends beyond the walls of a hospital or clinic.

Myka Steggall
Grade 10, Oberlin High School



"National Geographic Study Reveals Most Prehistoric Cave Paintings Were Done By Women"

The sterile fluorescents of the man glare on
I, who dares to skip into his office.
Crisp white starched shirt
maroon tie tied right, laid flat
Uniform.
His eyes pour onto the dirt on my knees
like enough disappointment could wash it off.
"I'm going to be an author," I say,
watching the words lace the air with gold.
My arms cradle my lover, my manuscript,
its ink smeared in kisses across my hands.
He is silent for a moment,
wondering how best to douse the fire in my eyes.
"What will you be really?" he muses.
Shame blooms on my cheeks
Roses of warm blood.
I feel a woman walk up to stand beside me,
her body veiled in animal skin
her hair intertwined with feathers.
She rests a berry-stained hand on my shoulder.
A painter rests her oil paint-slick palm on my back.
A sculptor cards her clay-cracked fingers through my
hair.
My mothers were artists.
Yours were too.
The heart of a woman is that
which cannot help but see beauty in the blanks,
see the stars in the darkest night.
It was you, guarded by a cubicle and your "real" degree
Who turned her easels into sinks
Smocks cinched into corsets,
drafts of books and poems turned into crying children.
But the world is gone without them.
Without what we create.
And through plastic, you cannot cup a cheek.

Myka is a member of Drama Club, Art Club, and Girl Scouts. Her favorite color is purple, and she enjoys bowling in her free time. She has taken multiple road trips across the country and especially loved visiting New England. Myka plans to major in creative writing in college and hopes to become a successful published author.

About Stop the Hate Youth Sing Out

Voices United for Social Change

This year, 851 students across 43 classrooms from 16 schools collaborated to write and perform original songs, using their voices as powerful tools to advocate for change. *Stop the Hate Youth Sing Out* is an arts-integrated learning initiative that encourages students to express their views on discrimination and injustice while fostering awareness of issues such as hate, racism, bias, bullying, etc., and inspiring action when these injustices are encountered.

Through the Maltz Museum's *Stop the Hate* digital lesson and the guidance of ROOTS of American Music teaching artists, the program enhances written and oral language skills while deepening students understanding of both historic and contemporary human rights issues. Classes compete for educational grants for their schools. Congratulations to all participants for using your voices to make a positive impact!

Youth Sing Out is presented in partnership with ROOTS of American Music.

Rhodes School of Environmental Studies

First Place High School

"You Don't Know Me"

Recipient of a \$3,000 Educational Grant

Congratulations to Lewis Treece 's 11th and 12th Grade Class

Walsh Jesuit High School

Runner-Up High School

"Break the Chain"

Recipient of a \$1,500 Educational Grant

Congratulations to Janet Creamer's Extra-Curricular/After School Class

North Ridgeville Academic Center

First Place Middle School

"We Will Rise"

Recipient of a \$3,000 Educational Grant

Congratulations to Kelly Koehler 's 2nd Period Class

Milkovich Middle School

Runner-Up Middle School

"Mystery of Iniquity"

Recipient of a \$1,500 Educational Grant

Congratulations to Mary Matisak's 5th Period Class

2026 Youth Sing Out Winners

"You Don't Know Me"

Rhodes School of Environmental Studies

Lewis Treece 's 11th and 12th Grade Class

First Place High School

ROOTS of American Music Teaching Artist: Matt "Cutty" Banner

You don't know me
You just think you do (x4)

Someone said I was gay because I kiss my friends on the cheek
"You're such a freak!"
No, I'm a proud Baricua who loves her friends and family

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

Ugly and nappy is what you see, but what God gave me is none of those things
"Ooh her hair probably stink!"
My hair is my crown, I wear it with pride whether its curly, straight, or braided to the side

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

Some people are so surprised that I'm so nice and quiet
"Black are so ghetto though"
They are trying to steal my light. Is it because I'm not white?
I need you to realize that Black women can also be cute, classy and demure

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

My Mom's family calls me the hard R
Acting like they are a czar
Black and proud with limitless skill, with unbreakable will

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)
What are you, White, Black, Hispanic?
"I mean, what are you?"
In America race is all that matters. Mixed people don't fit into a specific racial group,
it's just a big loop. I'm Human.

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

On a soccer team nobody likes me because I was in sports being fat
"Fat Boy!"
Yeah I'm a little heavy,
and I play football
In sports being skinny is not a law
I can prove it to you, just pass me the ball

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

They said I was fat
Now they say skinny
Obnoxious people
Just try and be witty
"Ooh, he's so skinny"
It doesn't matter how much you weigh
It's the talent that makes you great

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

When Trump began the mass deportation of illegals,
and like the eyes of an eagle, from crowds of my people,
A haystack and a needle
He does it with ease
"Girl go back to your country!"
Land of the free?
How can you say that to me.

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

Being a young Black man in America
they automatically think I'm a thief
"Girl you better hold your purse!"
My ancestors were Kings and Queens
Why would I steal from the Dollar Tree?

You don't know me
You just think you do (x2)

Being a Black Girl is not for the WEAK
I'm being raised in a country that does not see ME!
My coily hair, thick lips and cocoa brown skin are not considered IN
But my Mama taught me how to love myself, improve myself, be MYSELF
I am an independent force of nature, intelligent, strong, and PROUD
Being a black girl is not for the WEAK!
But as I walk the path my ancestors paved for me, the strength of their blood will carry ME
I love being Black, and Black love is Me!

You don't know me
You just think you do (x4)

“Break the Chain”
Walsh Jesuit High School
Janet Creamer’s Extra-Curricular/After School Class
Runner-Up High School
ROOTS of American Music Teaching Artist: Kennedy Nagel

Verse 1:

There’s a moment I replay every time I walk these halls
One word thrown so careless, like it couldn’t hurt at all
He said it hard and loud, and the whole room stayed the same
So I laughed it off in public while I swallowed all the shame

Played it cool, kept smiling, tried to act like I was fine
Learned how fast you start surviving when you cross that kind of line
That laugh was not permission, it was fear in disguise
It was choosing to stay breathing while my pride was set aside

Cuz that word leaves bruises even when you don’t react
Silence doesn’t stop the damage, it just teaches you to mask
I can’t go back and change it, but I’m standing here instead
Speaking truth into the space where my young self went quiet

What I wish I said then was, no, that wasn’t right
what I wish I told myself, no, you don’t deserve that plight
Same blood in these hallways, same ground under my feet
I take space without apology, I’m finally choosing me

Chorus 1:

It starts with you, what will you do?
Will you put the weapons down in your speech
To change the world with how you speak?
You’re making enemies, forget we’re the same
Different names, but the same pain
Will you start the change and (break the chain x2)

Verse 2:

She came to me with a storm in her chest,
Heart under pressure, pain not addressed.
Breath caught short every time she spoke,
Like she’s holding the world in her throat.

Scared of the dark but the light feel fake,
Lost in the noise she can’t escape.
Thoughts pile up, never got voiced,
Drowning in echoes inside her choice.

Truth in her tone didn’t yell – it shook,
Quiet-type pain nobody look.
That’s when I knew what it meant to stay,
Not fixing the hurt, just in the way.

I ain’t turn my back when the moment got heavy,
Didn’t say “be strong,” just kept it steady.
No perfect words, no script I read,
Just moving with her, step where she led.

Chorus 2:

It starts with me, what can I teach?
I put the weapons down in my speech,
I'll change the world with how I speak
I'll thrive on connection, I know we're the same
Love is stronger than fear and pain
I'm choosing to start the change, and (break the chain x2)

BRIDGE:

Same alarm in the morning light
Same long hours, same late nights
Fairness for all, make it right
Every wall falls when we don't divide
Kindness is the choice we make
When every word's like a match to a flame,
We've got to start the change, and (break the chain x2)

Verse 3:

"Men and women for others," yeah that's what you preach,
Posters on the wall but the practice don't reach.
Talk about love, talk morals, talk faith,
But respect disappears when I step in the space.

I'm judged off a look, off a name, off my skin,
While the same ones preaching God stay silent again.
Hallways echo words that shouldn't be said,
Then they bow their heads like it's in the past instead.

Don't sell me justice if it's only a phrase,
Don't quote Ignatius then ignore my pain.
I'm grinding for more, still holding my ground,
Fairness stay missing when I'm walking around.

If we really for others, let the action show,
Same respect for me as the rest you know.
I'm more than a label, more than your view,
I see through the words – now it's on you

Chorus 3:

If it's me and you,
If there's no more us and no more them
Just broken people learning again
There's a story inside, Dreams that live behind those eyes
it's time to make the change and
break the chain (x4)

We're gonna break the chain

“We Will Rise”

North Ridgeville Academic Center

Kelly Koehler 's 2nd Period Class

First Place Middle School

ROOTS of American Music Teaching Artist: Kennedy Nagel

Verse 1:

Bigots, they think that the melanin in our skin
Is enough to separate us from our kin
Sins, unwillin', grotesque people fillin'
Our minds with killin'

Not a full person, that's what they said
The world's supposed to be pain, it stays like a stain
*K-K- Covered by chains, and forced under a reign
And the history remains

Verse 2:

People are dying and families are crying
Nazis running the streets I can't stop it, but I'm trying
Politicians are lying, and bullets are flying.
This epidemic of liars, sounding like a full choir

Still not showing respect, Ref that's a tech
Even though we're taught how to not, It won't stop
But I can't quit
Yeah, there is time
And I know (x2)
The world's mine

Verse 3:

Things are fallin' apart, and I'm caught in the middle
I can't help but feelin' that I'm so very little
Not so inclusive, despite my pleas,
I always feel intrusive
No one cares about me

I'm in a glass prison
Don't like the way I'm living
A reckless, thoughtless captain
Leaving us splashing
But I can't quit
Yeah, there is time
And I know (x2)
The world's mine

Chorus:

I'll be real strong,
And I will thrive
With everyone's help,
We can survive
But I can't quit
Yeah, there is time
And I know deep down
That the world is mine

Bridge:

Generalizing colors, the people you meet
Even though they're just someone you saw on the street
But you only see the chapter, not the book
Sometimes it's just a page, who are we to say
With all the weight on my shoulders,
I'll push through the boulders,
Yeah I'll be bolder, when I grow older
The world's not black and white.
We'll continue to fight
I know things will be alright...

Chorus:

I'll be real strong,
And I will thrive
I still see a future
We can survive
I can't quit
Yeah, there is time
And I know deep down
That the world is mine

Outro:

And we will rise (x4)

**Ks are the sound, not the letter, but written as the letter to
allude to the KKK*

"Mystery of Iniquity"
Milkovich Middle School
Mary Matisak's 5th Period Class
Runner-Up Middle School
ROOTS of American Music Teaching Artist: Esther Fitz

Chorus:

Wondering who we are and what we've become
Why's the world so cold, when did we get numb
Thinking 'bout the world and all that it could be
All the answers underneath the mystery of iniquity (x2)

Verse 1:

Why would I be treated less
for my skin, for how I dress
who I love, how I express

We need to see a change
Take a second to reflect
We are all the same
Everyone deserves respect

Bridge:

We can be anything that we wanna be
We can find common ground when we disagree
We can make the future better for you and me
Forget about the surface, learn to love what's underneath

Chorus:

Wondering who we are and what we've become
Why's the world so cold, when did we get numb
Thinking 'bout the world and all that it could be
All the answers underneath the mystery of iniquity (x2)

Verse 2:

Why are some people treated differently
That's part of the mystery
That's not how it's meant to be

How can we treat each other better
Make room for our differences
Have joy and peace together

We need more compassion for our peers
It starts with taking action
Stop the pain, stop the tears

Be kind to other people, yeah
We need to change gear
Treat everybody equal
Make a difference while you're here

Bridge:

We can be anything that we wanna be
We can find common ground when we disagree
We can make the future better for you and me
Forget about the surface, learn to love what's underneath

Chorus:

Wondering who we are and what we've become
Why's the world so cold, when did we get numb
Thinking 'bout the world and all that it could be
All the answers underneath the mystery of iniquity (x2)

We can (x4)

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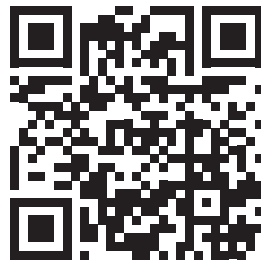
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