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VISIONS OF UNITY 2020

Literary Anthology

by

High School Students from Torrance, California

Visions of Unity Sponsors

Human Relations Forum of Torrance
with
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In memory of the late Jan Jackson, whose initiative as a piano teacher and a Baha'i mother of black and white children in Torrance inspired the first Visions of Unity contest in 1996.

Special thanks to our parents, student contestants, and participating teachers.
Your support is what keeps the contest – and its vision of unity – alive.

“Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom
by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Without forgiveness, there is no future.”

Desmond Tutu

“Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.
Without them, humanity cannot survive.”

Dalai Lama

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Mother Teresa

“Love will find its way through all languages on its own.”

Rumi

“You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean;
if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.”

Mahatma Gandhi

“So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.”

Baha'u'llah

“A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to
that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special.”

Nelson Mandela

VISUAL ARTS – WINNERS AND HONOREES

The students listed on this page submitted winning visual arts entries for the Visions of Unity contest, and we proudly recognize their achievements. Their art works are displayed at the Awards Celebration and the Torrance Civic Center Library.

Digital Art

First Place, **Ariana Marquez**, Torrance High School

Fine Art

First Place, **Daylan Perkins**, Shery High School

Second Place, **Sophia Doerge**, West High School

Third Place, **Lauren Ha**, West High School

Photography

First Place, **Sophia Wang**, South High School

Second Place, **Trevor Baldwin**, Torrance High School

Third Place, **Dillan Rovegno**, South High School

Honorable Mention, **Lilith Weeks-Young**, South High School

Sculpture

First Place, **Chaturika Bandara**, West High School

Second Place, **Krishoun Graves**, Torrance High School

LITERATURE – WINNERS AND HONOREES

Short Story

First Place, **Cynthia Ge**, West High School

Second Place, **Jason Jitsiripol**, North High School

Third Places, **Kelly Nguyen**, North High School, **Nita O'Malley**, South High School

Honorable Mentions, **Suzan Hui**, West High School, **Ethan Ha**, South High School

Essay

First Place, **Maria Angela Macalalag**, North High School

Second Places, **Sohaib Butt**, **Alyssa Mirabal**, North High School

Third Places, **Anoushka Gupta**, West High School, **Nicholas Sperling**, North High School

Honorable Mentions, **Lilianna Adame**, **Minh Nguyen**, **Salaidh Perez**, **Brian Pham**, **Mary Sasso**, North High School, **Jennifer Lau**, South High School

Poetry

First Place, **Khushi Kumra**, West High School

Second Place, **Giselle Pamintuan**, North High School

Third Place, **Lauren Amezquita-Quintas**, North High School

Honorable Mentions, **Shua Cho**, California Academy of Mathematics and Science, **Grayson Abrahams**, **Youssef Bebawy**, **Journey Hall**, **Casey Kwak**, **Amtul Malik**, **Zain Mohammad**, **Daniel Sarate**, **Sharallene Tunupopo**, North High School, **Catherine Wan**, South High School

Short Stories

CYNTHIA GE

**First Place Short Story
West High School (Stefanie Elwood)**

Breathe

The first boy I ever loved never touched me once. I met him at the edge of the ocean with a pebble for each star in the sky and I showed him the line where blue meets blue, as if he cared about where my home ended and heaven began. When he spoke, it was like waves of blue cascading over each other again and again and when I spoke, his eyes swept the other way, gifting me with a head full of gold and a handful of questions I was too scared to ask. He left me like that -- standing at the edge of the world with nothing but a fistful of sand and a heartful of memories and even the stone wall we built together couldn't keep the vengeful ocean from pushing in and reminding us why water is endless. I know he doesn't dream of me, but if I could hold him now, I'd tell him that there is life in the most unlikely of places, a spark between the most unlikely of people, a hope that's always worth preserving.

The first people to flee were merely a drop in the ocean, refugees from an island too small for the sea. He didn't think much of a couple hundred souls in a world with seven billion, but I guess he never understood the importance of family, that these refugees were my brothers and sisters, my uncles and aunties, cousins, once and twice removed and I don't know about his America, but we never overlook blood. Listen to the voices of the faded; can you hear the stories they tell? Of how the trees fell first, toppling under the weight of his actions after having been forced to hold up the sky for so long? Of how their homes tumbled down afterwards, the Eucalyptus wood that stood since the beginning of civilization returning back to dust (Stewart)? Of how their land crumbled, much like the line to the nursery rhyme he loved to sing to me: ashes, ashes we all fall down. I listened and I don't remember exactly what they said, but it sounded a lot like loss.

Second in line were the Carteret Islanders of Papua New Guinea, those from the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Maldives (Jetnil-Kijiner). Others will tell you that 1.5 meters above the ocean is like infinity -- the space between two ex-lovers, the distance to the moon, multiplied by two hundred fifty million -- but in our language, 1.5 meters means watching the sea inch closer and closer to the shore each day; it means holding our breaths, because I dare you: breathe, and we're submerged (Mortons). So to his people: talk about your immigration policies, your national emergencies, your nuclear wars, as if annihilating someone's home is something to be proud of. Tell me about your guns and I promise I will listen, but in return, allow me to tell you the story of our children, how an angel once asked me, "Why is the sea eating the ground?" (Nazer) and I could only reply, "God wants to bring us back to heaven." The school days are short, I'll say, because the kids can't concentrate due to the food shortages, but their eyes still shine with an eagerness to learn and denying them their education is as painful as affirming that climate change doesn't exist (Nazer). Explain to me how your politics matter more than these children. This isn't a national emergency; this is a worldwide crisis. How are we supposed to protect ourselves with only a handful of pebbles and hearts too big for the sea?

So to his people: stop holding your Aurelian heads high above the clouds, playing make believe God as if there is so much to be proud of and so little to cry about. I don't need to live in America to know that hate is a parasite living in her stomach with people crowding the streets screaming pointless profanities like climate change doesn't exist. Stop pretending like we don't exist, like the Taro and Carteret Islanders, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Maldives don't exist, because closing your eyes and praying to God doesn't make the problem disappear (Jetnil-Kijiner). But go ahead; ignore us now. But when our islands drown, know that it will only mark the beginning. We are wanderers with only a passport to call home; we are landless, cultureless, identityless families searching for the world we once knew and I invite you: come join us at the bottom of the ocean.

My momma tells me of a place where people of all different colors and ethnicities and stories can come together and face adversity head on. She says that the people there were raised to value integrity, that their parents told every single one of them they could change the world. This, I understand. Because we -- we are "hands reaching out, fists raising up. We are canoes blocking coal ships. We are the radiance of solar villages. We are families biking, recycling, reusing, engineers dreaming, designing, building, artists painting, dancing, writing (Jetnil-Kijiner)." We are the hope that's always worth preserving, the tomorrow that never comes without a fight, the future we all deserve. So to my future daughter: baby, look up. Those are the stars.

JASON JITSIRIPOL

Second Place Short Story
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)

An Ordinary Girl

My name is Faith, and I'm different compared to other people. Mainly because I am not a human. While I look mostly like a human, I also have a pair of ram horns on my head. I am a student attending Meadows Ridge High School. I walk to class hearing the students I pass by gossiping about me, calling me names such as "Demon," or making sheep noises at me. Luckily, most of them are smart enough not to bother me during class, but I get hit by the occasional crumpled up paper ball usually containing a message commenting on my horns. This has been going on for over a year.

However, something felt different today. I entered my first period class for the day. I hear excited whispering from my peers around me. I really don't care about what they are prattling on about so I end up ignoring their words. At least no one is paying attention to me today. My teacher, Mrs. Parker, walks up to the front of the class.

"As some of you might know, we have a new addition to the class," Mrs. Parker said, "Please, introduce yourself and tell us something interesting about you."

"My name is B-Brian Guilford," he said meekly, "I... I like to read books. E-Especially, fantasy novels. I h-hope that we can all have a good time t-together."

"You can sit over there next to Faith." Mrs. Parker points to the empty seat next to me.

I see Brian walk towards me, gazing intently at my horns. He's going to comment on them isn't he? "I like your horns," Brian tells me.

"...Wait, WHAT!" I yelled out, "You like my horns? But everyone else hates them."

"W-Why would they? Your horns are so cool. They remind me of a character from my favorite book series."

I can feel everyone looking in our direction. Better to defuse the situation before everyone starts talking. "We can talk more during lunch. Meet me in the West Wing" I whispered to him.

Brian just nods.

Class then progresses just like normal.

At lunch I do end up meeting with Brian in the West Wing. The West Wing is abandoned for most of the day, so I use this place as a personal sanctuary. "So tell me more about this character of yours," I said.

"Well... the character's name is Eliza. She is the strongest fighter of the heroes," Brian began. "She has faced discrimination in her world for her horns as some of her race is part of the prominent villain group in the world. However, the heroes have accepted her for who she actually is, not what the vocal minority shows of her race. Eliza is loyal, kind, honest... She really just wears her heart on her sleeve. She doesn't care what other people see her as, she just does what she believes is right. I think you're just like Eliza, having to deal with discrimination every day and being unable to express your true feelings or personality. You don't have someone to express any of this to. I want to be that person for you."

I smiled for what felt like the first time since never really. Everyone who looked at me viewed my appearance with disgust just because I looked different. Brian accepted that difference. Hearing him talk about Eliza, he felt like a different person than the one who introduced himself.

"You look better with a smile," he said to me. "I hate to see you gloomy all the time."

However, I had to stop smiling. "Are you sure you are willing to hang out with me?" I asked, "People will treat you like an outcast as you befriended the girl who everyone else hates. I want to give you one more chance to decide before it's too late."

"Why would I?! Your horns are what makes you pretty and your own unique person. If anyone says otherwise, then they're wrong! Deep down you're as ordinary of a person as anyone else."

I blushed at the compliment. "Well... I'm not quite sure what to say." I threw my arms around Brian's shoulders and hugged him. "I guess just that it's nice to know that there is someone out here who cares about me." I end up crying over his shoulder as I feel a cocktail of emotions inside of me, a cocktail made of sadness, happiness, and surprise.

I can feel him patting my back as the world blurs around me.

That day marked the point my life changed. Simply knowing there were people out there somewhere in the community who care about me made me feel warm and happy. Brian was the first friend I made and someone who became very dear to my heart. Even if the world questions my appearance, I simply tell them the thing Brian told me: "My name is Faith and I'm an ordinary girl just like anyone else."

KELLY NGUYEN

**Third Place (tie) Short Story
North High School (Rachel Lawrence)**

Perspectives

Jonny: age 11. White boy.

It was a hot sunny day in Money, Mississippi, so my mouth was quite dry. Even in the grocery store, it was hot. I was thirsty. My mouth had begun to tense up, and I was suddenly craving water. So I asked, "Momma, may I please grab a drink from the water fountain?"

"Sure honey. Don't get lost!" she replied as she was picking out the finest apples to make our apple pie. I rushed to go find the nearest water fountain. As I was on my way I saw my friend from school. He was quite different from me. His skin was a beautiful caramel brown. I never thought anything of it. My other friends would call him names and bully him. I never really understood why. I thought he was a nice person who minded his own business. Anyways, I waved to my friend, Jason.

"Hey, Jason! Where are you going?" I asked while crossing the street to get to him.

"H..hi Jonny. I'm going to the water fountain. I'm a bit thirsty since it's so hot." Jason stuttered.

"Me, too! Let's go together." I replied giving him a bright smile.

"Ok," he said faintly as he gave me a faint smile. We walked and soon we had reached the water fountain. At the top, there was a sign reading, "Blacks right, whites left." I looked at it, confused, but Jason knew immediately what it meant. He walked over to the right and started drinking water.

"You don't know what it means?" he questioned.

"No, what does it mean?" I said as I gazed at him. Jason looked around for a bit. He looked at me and gave me another faint smile. There was a slight silence for a moment.

"You seem thirsty. Drink some water, first," he replied. I drank some water and turned back around to face Jason. We started walking back to the grocery store. He had explained to me how in this society, blacks and whites were treated differently because of their skin. He also told me how lucky I was to be born white. I was confused. What did being white have to do with this?

I asked him "why?" He was quiet for a bit. After a few moments, he replied back.

As he stepped onto the bus, he whispered under his breath slowly, "I don't know."

Jason: age: 10. African-American boy.

As I stepped on the bus, people were giving me side glances. The people in the front pointed to the sign, "Blacks in the back." I continued walking to the back. I sat down at the very end of the row. The seats were torn, and they were a bit itchy. I ignored it since my destination wasn't far. Soon the bus arrived at my stop. My stop was the main street. Everyone says it's the best place to find a job, so I decided to come so I could get a job to support my mom and baby sister. I walked past many shops looking for workers, but all of them said, "whites only." I was a bit upset but it wasn't a big deal, I knew I would find a job sooner or later. Time was passing, and I still found no jobs. I decided to just go home. As I was walking towards the bus station, I saw a job opening at the grocery store. It didn't say "whites only." It didn't say anything. It just said, "Opening position ages 9-15." I started walking towards the grocery store to register for the job until I heard a familiar voice call out my name. I turned around and saw it was my friend Johnny from school. He was white and had beautiful blue eyes and golden blond hair.

"Hey, Jason! Where are you going?" he called out.

"H..hi Jonny. I'm going to the water fountain. I'm a bit thirsty since it's so hot." I lied, stuttering a bit since I was so embarrassed.

"Me, too! Let's go together," he replied giving me a smile.

"Okay," I said giving him a faint smile. We started walking towards the water fountain. As we were walking, I saw many people giving me looks because I was with a white boy. Soon, we finally reached the water fountain. Johnny looked surprised as he looked at the sign that read "whites left, blacks right." I looked at him and drank some water from the colored side of the fountain. He looked confused.

"You don't know what it means?" I asked.

"No, what does it mean?" he said as he gazed at me straight in the eye. I looked around and there was a moment of silence.

"You seem thirsty. Drink some water first," I replied to break the silence. He drank some water and turned back around to face me again. We started walking back to the grocery store. I vividly explained to him how in this society, blacks and whites were treated differently because of their skin and how lucky he was to be born white. He asked me "Why?" I was quiet for a bit. I didn't know how to answer that. After a few moments, I finally replied back. As I stepped onto the bus, I whispered under my breath slowly, "I don't know."

NITA O'MALLEY

**Third Place (tie) Short Story
South High School (Julie O'Brien)**

The Knight in Shining Armor

A small town in Ireland was claimed with the name of Kinsale. Kinsale was home to men of great charm, women of superior intelligence, and children with many joys. The grass was fresh and green, and the skies were streaked with gray, rainy clouds ready to release their drops at any given moment. Brick and stone houses filled the hills; conversations and laughter were always floating through the cool, sharp air.

The knight in shining armor, with the great white horse as a companion, again runs through the town. *Wooh's* and *ahh's* are heard from the people. Children buzz with excitement and wonder, women swoon with lust and delight, and the men tense with respect and slight intimidation. The knight can hear Kinsale reacting to the shiny armor and powerful steed, but the helmet stays on, and the head droops low as if to hide even further into the cold metal. The knight doesn't desire attention.

The knight desires cold, sleepless nights, alone with the stars and moon. The knight wants blazing deserts, dry throats, and sand sleeping in the heat. Long adventures and lonely campfires, and slaying beasts. The knight in shining armor wants to be a hero, one gallop at a time. So, one night the knight set off for a big adventure, god knows how long of a time it would last. The dashing knight ran through deep valleys, green hills, shallow rivers, busy towns, and rocky roads. The knight in shining armor could never get bored of this.

The knight and the horse smiled widely and cherished every sunrise, sunset, every star in the sky, and every bead of sweat that fell down their faces. One sleepless night, at the peak of their joy, they stopped with a frown. A gray, stone tower, practically touching the stars stood in front of them. They ran closer and wondered, but soon their frowns deepened and their faces were met with heat as they reached a deep cliff. A moat of lava surrounded the fortress and a dragon flew around it with scorn on its face. The knight's brows furrowed, jaw clenched, and eyes squinted. The knight knew what she had to do.

She ran, she fought, she jumped, and her horse waited nervously for his master to return. It was many rainy days, heated nights, and the horse was beginning to feel hopeless. However, the horse quickly stood and began whinnying as a bridge began being lowered

through the moat. His knight in shining armor was running, a princess in her arms. They hopped on and the horse galloped away.

Days passed and the knight said she'd seen many sunrises, sunsets, and every star in the sky, yet she'd never seen such beauty as the smile on the princess's face; she'd never felt so alive than when the princess held her waist to stay balanced on the great white horse. The knight had never felt this kind of love for anyone. So, the princess told her she would stay with her for as long as she cares for her to be around. Because the princess had never felt so royal; she had never felt so cherished, and the knight saw her for who she truly was.

So the knight in shining armor, with a great white horse as a companion and a beautiful princess holding her waist from behind, runs through the town. *Wooh's* and *ahh's* are heard from the citizens. Children buzz with excitement and wonder, women swoon with lust and delight, and the men tense with respect but slight intimidation. The knight stops in the middle of the village and gives the princess a helping hand off her great steed. The community gathers around to see why the knight in shining armor has returned, and why the knight is stopping for once, instead of just running through and keeping the helmet on and the head low.

The knight holds the princess close and introduces her to the people of Kinsale. They *aww* and *ooh* to the story of her trauma and claim the knight is a hero. Many women offer to help treat the princess. Food, beds, and many treats are offered to the princess. Children offer flowers and ask her if she is the wife of the great man in shining armor. Her eyebrows furrow as the word *man* comes out of their mouths. She explains to the children that she was saved by a woman knight, and they run off with wide eyes. Her eyebrows continued to furrow, and she tilted her head in confusion.

The next morning, the knight in shining armor and her beautiful princess lay dead, stoned by the men and women of the village. They shouted and screamed, they didn't want a *homosexual* in their town of great charm, superior intelligence, and many joys. They didn't want the two women's love to interfere with the natural and loving community they had worked so hard to build. They didn't want their sinful morals to rub off on their children. The knight in shining armor was no longer loved by children buzzing with excitement and wonder, women swooning with lust and delight, and the men tensing with respect but slight intimidation. The knight in shining armor was now just a weak woman who fell in love with a princess.

SUZAN HUI

**Honorable Mention, Short Story
West High School (Cunningham)**

Lunar Night

On the evening of the Lunar New Year, a little girl of five stared in wonder at the food laid out on the large, wooden dining table. On top were fresh fruits, dried fruit and nut mixes, steaming soups, crispy crackers, and colorful candies. She admired the red decorations with the large character “福” (fú) hung up on the surrounding walls, the two candles dancing at the head of the table, and the smell of incense burning. As a high school student years later, she liked to remember those sweet memories.

Cindy Wong always loved her yearly customs. It was one of the few times that her parents splurged a little to cook up a feast to uphold their traditions. She enjoyed the food, the burning of paper money to her ancestors in Heaven and Hell, and receiving her red envelopes full of money. She had never thought anything otherwise.

It wasn't until a day before the holiday that she began having different thoughts. She had invited her partner, Amelia, to her house to work on their English project. They were to compare different traditions in their families and present their observations to their class. Her partner was an American, whereas Cindy is a Chinese-American.

Cindy's mother was preparing the feast that afternoon. The house was filled with blends of scents of herbs and meats. Cindy and her father helped set up the dining table and prepared the incense to burn. Filled with enthusiasm, Cindy explained the customs of her family to Amelia as she ran around and showed her the decorations, the food, and their small altar.

Amelia watched in awe as Cindy's family prepared for the celebration. She admired the time and effort being put into the event. She soaked up as much information as she could for the project.

The next day, Amelia invited Cindy over to her house for dinner. It was a quick, informal meal between the girls and Amelia's parents. Even then, Cindy noticed the different manners in Amelia's house and hers, such as saying grace before dinner.

Amelia excitedly told her parents about the preparations the Wongs made for the Lunar New Year. Her parents smiled and asked Cindy many questions. She felt comfortable answering many of them, until Amelia's mother asked, "Why do you do all of this? Why don't you celebrate like this on American New Year's Day?"

Cindy didn't know how to answer. She had never thought about it before. Lunar New Year didn't have a set date as it was based on the lunar calendar. Why is it the most important day of the year for her Chinese family?

Later, when Cindy arrived home, she went to her mom. The question had been bothering her the whole evening.

"Mama," Cindy started, "Why do we Chinese celebrate the New Year on different days each year?"

"Because of the lunar calendar. You know that," her mother replied.

"Yes, but why?"

"At the start of the lunar calendar is when we can communicate with our ancestors. It is the day when we give thanks for their sacrifices in helping us live in a better future. As they grew in dark and harsh times, they hoped that we would be able to live together in happiness. That's why we celebrate their hard-earned achievements in the family on this day. Your mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, and all of your other ancestors, lived for you."

Cindy had never thought of it that way. Her mother's words opened her eyes to the importance of her family years ago. She had thought that the day was simply a holiday to celebrate the start of the new year. Now she understood that it went beyond that.

One week after her talk with her mom, Cindy and Amelia presented their project. As their teacher listened to their closing statement, she asked, "Why do you think I assigned this project?"

"It was assigned so that we could understand the importance of traditions and the history behind them to remind us that we all have our different pasts," replied Cindy.

"Despite our differences, we are all united today in this school and country."

ETHAN HA

**Honorable Mention, Short Story
South High School (Julie O'Brien)**

First Day

Today is my first day at school. I'm very excited because I've never been to a real school. That's because I'm supposed to be special since Dr. Peter always says so. Mom and dad argued a lot before this. Dad keeps saying it will be too much for me to handle. But mom says she thinks I'm ready. I think I'm ready.

I was late to my first class because I could not open my locker. But the teacher said it was okay because it was only the first day. He asked me to take a seat but I didn't understand why he said that.

"But that's stealing."

The teacher gave me a look, so I didn't talk after that.

The lunch bell rang so it was time for lunch. I don't want to eat school lunch because I don't know what is in it. So I just pulled out the peanut butter crackers that I had in my pocket. I walked over to an empty seat next to a blonde boy and a lot of other kids.

"Sorry this seat is taken, kid."

"Please do not call me a kid. Only mama calls me that."

He shoved me, which knocked me off balance.

"Get out of here, kid."

The other kids laughed at me, so I walked over to another table and sat by myself. But that was okay because I usually sit by myself, anyway. I closed my eyes when I ate the peanut butter crackers because it tastes better that way.

"Just ignore those guys."

I opened my eyes and there was a pretty girl standing right in front of me. She reminded me of mama, so I said that she could call me kid. She laughed at me but it wasn't like when the other boys were laughing. I think she was laughing because she thought I was funny. She sat down next to me and opened her lunchbox.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

“Yes, I have never been to a real school before.”

“Hey, that’s fine. I just transferred here, too.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just looked at her.

“Anyway, I’m Janice. What’s your name?”

“I’m Louis. What is your name?”

My cheeks got hot because I knew that I said something wrong. She laughed at me again and said I was funny. For some reason they got even hotter when she said that. She stayed with me until the bell rang again, which meant I had to go to class again.

It was the same teacher as the first class, so I sat in the back of the classroom. I looked to my right, and I watched the blonde boy as he sat down next to me.

“I missed you, kid.”

The other kids started to laugh again, and my cheeks got hot. I wanted to tell him to stop calling me that, but I remembered that Janice told me to ignore him. And I listened to her because she is like mama who is pretty and nice. The blonde boy looked at me and saw that I ignored him, so he just went back to talking to the other kids.

The day seemed to go by very fast because usually I don’t do much at my special school. Janice asked to walk me home, but I said no because I am not a kid anymore.

Sometimes, I get sad when I think about the mean people at school. But when that happens, I just tell myself that there are really nice people, too, like Janice and mama and dad, and then I am happy.

Essays

MARIA ANGELA MACALALAG

**First Place Essay
North High School (Lisa Nichols)**

Break What We Have Built

Evolutionary psychology has emphasized that, as humans, we fear the unknown. History has put up walls that have not been broken down yet, preventing us from knowing one another past the color of our skin--creating an inevitable fear of one another. Though discrimination is not as severe and prominent as it was centuries ago, racial bias continues to plague society and the world everywhere. In the 1960s, Civil Rights activists sacrificed their lives for equality; it is now the duty of all American citizens to continue this work and make the dream a reality. The solution is not division, but acceptance for all cultures and traditions.

There is a reason why the word “peace” is always associated with “unity”: One does not exist without the other. The era between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement bore a time period of hate crimes, segregation, and brutal discrimination. Division was enforced and taught before children reached the age of ten. “Separate but equal” implemented segregated schools, restaurants, churches, restrooms, water fountains, bus sections; the list is *endless*. The group of people who endured this most was the African Americans, but the immoral practice affected all people of color. Though less common, Asian and Irish immigrants suffered the same treatment. Equality did not exist, and although laws were created after the Civil War to promote unity, the people were more divided than ever. The separation only created a larger rift between the races, worsening the treatment given to people of color. The closer people clustered to those who looked like them, the more difficult it was to be able to sympathize and understand a person who was different.

From childhood, we are taught that good behavior begets good rewards. However, this is not necessarily true for people of color. In her classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee emphasizes the paradoxical injustice in the so-called “justice” system. The sad truth is, cases like the one concerning Tom Robinson were not uncommon. All over the country (especially in the South) innocent black men and women were being convicted of crimes they did not commit, with evidence that was either irrelevant or completely false. The bias against people of color allowed juries and the public to make their assumptions before a trial was even held. Laws were violated and loopholes were found, even when a prisoner was clearly innocent. Judges and juries failed to look past skin and see the person underneath. These circumstances were frustrating and infuriating, and placed minorities in a helpless position. The system that was meant to protect them failed.

Because patience was proving to be ineffective, the only choice left was to fight back. These people endured riots, boycotts, and sit-ins for their freedom. Some even lost their lives.

What are *we* doing?

Discrimination has not disappeared; it’s in the news every day. Racist slurs clouding the internet and being disregarded because they’re “just a joke”; a wall being built to keep immigrants out of our country; a black man, shot dead because an officer mistook a hairbrush in his hand for a gun--occurrences that were once considered tragedies, like everything else, have become insignificant because they happen so much. We are desensitized to the prejudice before our eyes.

Fear is a powerful and driving emotion, and is found at the root of discrimination. We fear what we do not know. So we stick people in jail cells. We isolate them and put up walls. We make them believe they are less than human. And after a while, we begin to believe it is the right thing to do. We have to do more than post our condolences on social media and move on within the week. The point of learning history is to be able to prevent it from repeating; we must learn from what has happened in the past and advocate for what we believe is moral. We must explore past the boundaries that define our cultures and attempt to understand the people we have always looked past or else the walls within our communities will never be torn down.

SOHAIB BUTT

**Second Place (tie) Essay
North High School (Lisa Nichols)**

The New, the Better, and the Old

Whenever I mention to people how I'm trilingual, it always seems to catch them off guard. I mean, it never seemed very strange to me to be able to speak three languages fluently. My tongue would flit every time I said "Assalamualaikum" in Urdu to my mother after a long, hard day of school. Or, being able to pronounce and spell the word "Fortification" correctly, when I was only a wee 4th grader, still learning how Americans thought, worked, and communicated with one another. Or being able to speak Punjabi and combine it with Urdu to make my cousins laugh.

I've heard so many stories of people having trouble adjusting to life in America as an immigrant, but I always tell people that I never had a problem. To a certain extent, that truth was in fact, a lie. Pakistani first generation immigrants seem to have a lot of trouble adjusting to a world so foreign to them, a world where, on a moment's notice, the love between two people will cease to exist because the "boyfriend" cheated on the "girlfriend"; a world where the brown kids are bullied for bringing a kebab sandwich roll to lunch instead of a bland peanut butter sandwich; a world where once you reveal that you're a Muslim or even try to advocate for your unrepresented culture, you're seen with dagger like eyes that whisper, "terrorist. bomber. rapist. enforcer of arranged marriage." Yes, I've born the brunt of all of these insults, and instead of fighting back like I did when I was a child, I would purse my lips like my Ami and Abu always told me to. I was not allowed to escalate the situation because my parents said that I'd be blamed.

All the times I'd won the Spelling Bee, the Reading Contest, and the Short, Creative Story Competition would be washed down the drain when I'd say, "Hi, my name is Sohaib Butt and I'm from Pakistan!" They would furrow their brows, confused, asking, "Where's that?" I would retort with a sigh, simply saying, "It's near India." They would howl as they would bombard me with "Is curry your favorite food? Is it true that you guys speak Indian?"

Is your real name Mohammad?" I would just walk away shaking my head, and Mrs. Hinman would tell us all to quiet down as I sat pondering my life.

I've always felt as if I carried the burden of my entire culture, my people, and my family. And I still do. Even in one of the most diverse schools in Torrance, I feel obligated to bring my people the salvation they deserve for all their hard work. My mother always told me how, "Education sabhi important cheez hai. Kiun kai agar tum apna dil laga k paro gai, phir tum hum sab ko acha sabaat karo gai. Aur tum doosray logon ko bhi acha banao gai," which means, "Education is the most important thing in your life. Because if you put your heart and soul into your work and learn, then you will prove that we are good people. And you will make other people better!"

When I entered 8th grade, my worries of discrimination died down. I became well respected because of my mother's code. What she taught me had worked! I began to work very hard, pushing myself every day never to strive for less and always to put all my effort forth in whatever I did. Then it happened. I was chosen as the male Student of the Year in 2017, along with a Hispanic girl when I graduated from middle school. I was shocked, excited, confused, but felt worthy of it all. Most of all, I felt proud, not of myself, but of my parents for instilling in me the values that I still live by today. And I felt so glad to have immigrated to Torrance, California. It gave me faith in the system and a sense of optimism that we as people do strive for racial equality.

We all matter, and Torrance has proven that to be the case, time and time again. I think back sometimes to the days when the kids would make fun of my last name, "Butt." I truly didn't know what it meant! All I knew was that it belonged to my father, the man that gave up everything to move here, his potential life as an Olympian in weightlifting, his family, and his respect. All for me. All because he had faith that the American system is the best and will continue to strive for greatness.

I live by my sheep-farming great grandfather, by my father's sacrifices, and by my mother's code.

This is our way.

ALYSSA MIRABAL

**Second Place (tie) Essay
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

250 Novels Crafted Every Minute

Reading is a lost art, many claim. Reading for personal pleasure has become extinct. But the world itself is a library. Every person is a book crafted over one's lifetime. The experiences we endure, relationships we form, subjects we learn, and memories we make create a paperback of information simply in the shape of the human body. The mind is the glossary, the exterior --scars, birthmarks, and bruises--serve as the cover, and the heart is the binding simply keeping our stories alive, preserving our ability to share ourselves with the rest of the world. Every time we meet someone new, we read them subconsciously. It is one of the greatest skills we humans unknowingly possess.

In a world with so many genres, languages, and styles, it is remarkable how we have yet to truly explore such diversity. Human beings remain stagnant in the sense that it is difficult to stray away from society's conventional "box." If an individual has had an upbringing solely surrounded by pieces of nonfiction, it is an arduous, daunting task for them to explore dystopian fiction. These fears of the new and unknown have occurred at the hands of societal pressures. No one dares defy the mold of conformity because it has a negative connotation; people allow their lives to be controlled by the almighty "what if." In actuality, this control the unknown has over humans is completely understandable. Fear itself is a natural phenomenon all experience at some point in their lives, but it is not an excuse for inhibiting personal growth and exposure to the beautiful unknown that stands before us.

At times, unity is prevented by ignorance. The term ignorance has developed a negative connotation as a result of society's wrongdoings, specifically beginning with slavery. However, ignorance is truly defined as "the state or fact of being ignorant; lack of knowledge, learning, information, etc." (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). There is a simple remedy to the illness of ignorance—knowledge through education. If people were to know about the wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, mental

illnesses, disabilities, political parties, and personal beliefs, they would come to understand the beauty that resonates in diversity and eventually appreciate the uniqueness found in each individual's story. Education serves as a beacon of hope for future generations; it has the capability to prevent unjustifiable discrimination and foolish hatred. For centuries, education has been inaccessible all around the world. For this reason, senseless acts of violence have broken out as a result of universal hatred towards a particular group of beings, whether that be a certain political party or specific country. The world possesses the power necessary to spread education. By 2020, education should have spread like wildfire; every child around the globe should have access to education. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Unity is the ultimate goal--all people of the world standing hand in hand; people with all different skin tones, hair colors, religions, ethnicities, and occupations. They are all wearing smiles that spread from cheek to cheek, speaking in different tongues, yet there is mutual understanding amongst them all. It is a beautiful sight to see, is it not? Each piece of literature possesses its own uniqueness. There is no novel that is the same. Yes, of course, there are several novels in the same genre or written on the same topic, but they refrain from being identical. Plagiarism is frowned upon, yet we encourage the congregation of groups, assimilation, and conformity. True beauty resides in variation, complexities, and change. If variation failed to take place, the greats —William Shakespeare, Frida Khalo, and Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few— would cease to exist. Our world is a library: We have immeasurable amounts of information and knowledge right at our fingertips. This information and knowledge dwells in the novels that live in our library; we simply have to be willing to pick up a book.

NICHOLAS SPERLING

**Third Place (tie) Essay
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

Compromise

When I was five years old, my father took me to the park to play and get some fresh air. The air was brisk but sweet, and my energy to keep playing was everlasting. However, every great thing has to end. The day was getting darker, and my dad told me that we needed to go home; although his choice was valid, in my five-year-old mind this was a couple notches down from his telling me the world was going to end.

I begged and begged for him to give me at least five more minutes so I could get one more go on the twisty yellow slide. He stopped and crouched down to reach eye level with me. He told me, "Do you know what a compromise is?" I had never heard of such a word, so I asked, "What is it?" He answered, "I will give you 15 minutes to keep playing, but when those fifteen minutes are up you need to go home. This is called a compromise." At that moment my stress and urgency to keep playing ceased to exist, and I completely understood what he was asking, because it made so much sense to have a win-win situation that he proposed.

In our society today we as a nation are deeply divided politically. Trump being in office has made two sides to our country and, because of this, people have created extreme tensions and conflict with one another. We all can't become bigger than ourselves and put our differences aside to create something better out of all of our division and political separation. As a country, as a society, we all deserve a well-developed "compromise."

A compromise can be as little as an agreement between a father and a son, or it can be as big as bringing a country together through unity and growing from our mistakes. If we lived in a world without our political beliefs to set us back and alter our choices as a nation and as individuals, the world would be a better place. There would be no conflict to blind us from the real problems that our society faces, not another war, not another news anchor talking about Trump's twitter account.

We all get so caught up in the useless fluff that makes up our everyday lives. Because of that, we aren't listening to the people in need, and we aren't listening to the world asking us as a society for help.

All it takes is a compromise.

ANOUSHKA GUPTA

**Third Place (tie) Essay
West High School (Stephanie Elwood)**

Breaking Open the Door

I was taught to fear Muslims.

There was never an explicit lesson; no teacher ever went up to the board and wrote Islamophobia 101. No, it was my uncle at family gatherings arguing, “It’s all those Muslims’ fault” or my aunt’s harsh glare as she walked past a shawl-covered woman on the street. You see, I’m a Hindu Indian. I was brought up to see Muslim-Indians as the other. As something to fear.

So when my parents told me that my grandfather wanted all of us to travel to Kashmir, I was shocked. Known to be a hot-bed of Hindu-Muslim violence, the Indian state wasn’t exactly a “tourist destination” and is constantly plagued by deadly religious riots.

But my grandfather wasn’t afraid and insisted we go anyway. While there, the words of my uncle and aunt clouded my vision, preventing me from seeing the lush greenery; instead, all I saw was dirty graffiti proclaiming Death to Hindus. My fears deepened when my grandfather took us to visit an old house.

So there I was, looking up at an ancient door. All I could imagine was a gun behind it, muzzle pointing straight at me ready to fire in an explosion of hatred. Everything I had been taught my whole life had coalesced into one single moment and I... was terrified.

But then the door opened. I was greeted not by a gun but by a smiling bearded man who, upon seeing my grandfather, said, “Uncle ji, ap ho.” Uncle, it’s you.

It turned out that, thirty years ago, the rickety old building had actually been my family’s home. My grandfather, a military man, had been stationed there during the apex of anti-Hindu violence. However, he was able to stay safe thanks to a Muslim family who was kind enough to give him refuge—a family whose son was currently standing before us. Watching my Hindu father and his Muslim

friend laugh at the same jokes, speak the same language, and eat the same food together, I felt as if I could actually see for the first time.

That day, I came face to face with not a stranger, but myself. I had imagined a vengeful man with a gun when really the weapon was in my hands. Armed with only the opinions of others, I had been willing to close the door on a person I didn't even know, a person who had given my father sanctuary; a person without whose kindness I may not even be alive. But, when I opened my mind to the family across the barrier, I saw not an enemy or a Muslim, but a human.

In the end, that is all we are. Humans. We all laugh, cry, hate. But in spite of all our flaws, we have an endless capacity to love. In a world that seems one step away from chaos, polarization is only adding fuel to the fire. So, reach out. Listen to other people. Try to understand *their* story. Maybe you, too, will find compassion behind a closed door.

MARY SASSO

**Honorable Mention, Essay
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

Intertwining Cultures

When I look around Torrance, I am amazed to see such a diverse and dynamic community. Torrance is a place where people from all over the world come together as one to build a welcoming, multicultural community. Torrance is one of the reasons why I greatly value the importance of cultural exchanges, and it all started with one program that Torrance offers: The Sister City School Exchange with Kashiwa.

For the past twenty-five years in Torrance, my high school and Kashiwa Municipal High School in Japan have participated in this exchange program. The students from Kashiwa are hosted by American high schoolers and are able to learn and be a part of their culture for one week. Twenty-two American students, twenty-two Japanese students, seven days, and one jam-packed schedule.

Last year, I was given the opportunity to participate in this enriching program. I hosted the sweetest girl named Mei, and it was an honor to have her stay in my home. Now,

I'm part Italian and part Filipino—I did not know a single word in Japanese. Due to this, I was initially nervous about how we would be able to communicate with each other since she did not speak fluent English, either. However, I was not going to let a language barrier stop us from the universal joy of human connection. I promised myself to make Mei feel as comfortable and welcomed as possible.

I introduced Mei to my family and friends, took her out to eat staple American foods where we stuffed our faces with burgers and pizza, and took her to various famous Los Angeles tourist attractions, where we took an endless amount of pictures to capture the moments we shared together. She also joined us in a traditional Monday Night Football and barbeque dinner. We drank what seemed like gallons of boba together and shopped till we dropped at malls. Mei also taught me a few things about her own culture. She cooked a traditional Japanese salmon dinner called “Shiozake”—it was the most delicious thing I had ever tasted. She even taught me a few Japanese words— “Onaka suite,” meaning “I’m hungry,” stuck with me the most. For one week, we did everything together. For one week, Mei was family.

The departure of Mei and the rest of the Kashiwa students was heartbreaking. It was crazy how close we all became in just one week. We had created an everlasting bond with each other in such a short matter of time. Saying goodbye proved to be impossible. The program turned out to be an exchange of two cultures that seemed to be entirely dissimilar from one another, yet built unbreakable relationships when brought together. Learning about another culture is always fascinating; getting to interact with people from it and showing them the way I live in America takes it to a whole new level. Nothing felt more rewarding than being able to contribute towards bringing two cultures side by side, cultivating a family in which people from different lifestyles can come as one and make everlasting memories.

The Kashiwa program completely expanded my perspective of another lifestyle. It strengthened my belief in the importance of multicultural experiences. My vision of unity is to keep programs like these alive and growing in society, where cultures can connect and learn from each other--a society where people do not ostracize others for the color of their skin; a society where we keep an open mind towards those who do not share the same cultural backgrounds as us. All it takes is an understanding attitude and a compassionate heart to create interactive communities where people can be brought together in harmony, no matter where they are from.

SALAI DH PEREZ

**Honorable Mention, Essay
North High School (Lisa Nichols)**

A New World

The person I am today is someone who has come to appreciate the ethnic diversity and foreign cultures that enrich my world. I often visit the home of my close friends where we enjoy tasty Japanese snacks that they've taught me how to make, while I frequently teach them Spanish vocabulary that they enjoy practicing. My everyday life is packed with distinct yet closely related foods, languages, and traditions, and it's one of the things I'm most thankful for.

But I've also reflected upon the fact that for the early part of my life, my attitude towards the cultures that enhance my life today was one of disdain and disregard. I considered the ways and customs of other cultures "weird", and I hold one especially vivid memory of this disgust towards things I considered *different*. My elementary school had a Korean-Dual Language Program, where one class from each grade level would give instruction in Korean. Naturally these classes consisted of native students, and during lunchtime they'd all crowd into the same table, and while it wasn't designated solely for them, no one else, myself included, felt a desire to eat at *their* table, where the only thing spoken was "ching-chong". We'd watch them from afar, commenting on their incomprehensible words and laughing at classmates' imitations of their tiny, slanted eyes.

One day, I watched one of these "Chinese" girls take out a food container and saw as she opened it to a small pile of a substance cut into thin pieces that I couldn't make out, and we began to notice the unfamiliar smell that drifted from their table to ours. "EWW!" we cried, "What is *that*?" I noticed an opening to be that day's star, and I immediately shared my incomplete and incorrect observation with everybody at my table: "She's eating worms! I saw her take out a plate full of worms-look!" Quickly accepted, my accusation led to chaos, as my classmates roared with laughter, gagged, and continued their bewildered glances at the girl and her table. To this day, I have no idea what she was really eating that day.

And while my ignorance of cultures other than mine became less public- partly to my recognition of the fact that I couldn't voice these judgmental views out loud-it wasn't

until the beginning of my eighth grade year when I joined North's Korean 1 course that I finally let go of my intolerance and joined a world of appreciation and understanding. The "ching chong" words that I'd ridiculed for so long became familiar sounds to my ears as I mastered the Hangul alphabet. I developed a love for the 김밥 and 만두 and 떡볶이 that I'd once gagged at and that my teacher introduced us to. The accidental stroke of fate that'd placed me in Korean gave rise to the beginning of a new phase in my life-one where I've developed a respect towards the various cultures that surround me in my community and that's encouraged me to foster an appreciation for the different lifestyles that offer us the chances of new experiences.

It is these combinations and mergers of different cultures that truly add to our lives, and they are the weapons that break down the barriers of ignorance and unfamiliarity that so many of us first met. As I learned from my own experience, we don't have to dive head deep into an unfamiliar world in order to develop some tolerance and respect for it-we just have to be willing to dip our toes in, and the rest will follow. As someone who has built friendships, been introduced to a world never known before, and has learned how to open her mind to any and all inviting opportunities thanks to the simple enrollment into a high school Korean class, I will work towards creating a future where universal understanding of each other's customs and traditions will make it resonant that we all come from the same past.

LILIANNA ADAME

**Honorable Mention, Essay
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

Culture Carried Upon My Shoulders

In my world, my options aren't concert tickets or a new makeup pallet. They're a pair of pants or a new backpack for the new school year. When I was little my mom's choices were buying a new onesie or diapers for me.

We are not the fortunate ones. Not even close.

I grew up in a culture where if dinner is frijoles and tortillas each night, so be it. What is the point in fighting a social stereotype I cannot change, because it is so mortifyingly realistic? Coming from a Mexican household, family *es todo*. Despite a recent argument that occurred, despite what was said, if a family member needs help, is in desperate need of groceries to last the rest of the month because they simply can't afford to buy any, we are there for each other. I am not middle class. I am not low class. My family and I are the bridge that lies in between.

I used to be ashamed of where I derive from--the color of skin that leaked onto my body from the canvas of my ancestors; the milky brown color of my wide orbs that oozes into the eyes of all of my relatives. Now, I embody those qualities. With pride. Now, I am ashamed of not possessing the native tongue that my mom and her siblings, grandparents and great grandparents possess. At family fiestas I repeat the same phrase to my tios, cousins, and little nephews with my head held low and shoulders sunken as close to the ground as I could carry them.

No entiendo.

I expect to look up to the shaking cascade of dark hair covered heads of disapproval. Instead, I look up to those endless brown eyes radiating sympathy. I feel the consoling rays on my face. The warmth enlivens my spirits. I am accepted. Not in spite of my insecurities but because of them.

As I grew older, my little world widened each day. Numerous friends came and went from differing backgrounds. Some shared my financial struggles. Some could not even decipher how to put themselves into my faded shoes. Nevertheless, from each of these friendships I gained knowledge. A cultural acceptance within me was unlocked by discovering the depths of ancestral traditions around the globe. Through learning about other cultures by being a guest to family dinners and spending weekends at friends' houses, I came back home and saw my living room a little differently. I notice and smile more at the collection of portraits of our Heavenly Father, the Rosary chain that is hung above my bed, and the altar of photo frames of the beloved family members that passed away accompanied by glasses of holy water. This is my family heritage. These customs are what I have come to appreciate.

My origins are not my burdens. Financial struggles are not my downfalls. I will not let them be. My economic background is not the sole aspect that defines me. Every aspect, conjoined into one entity, is what defines me.

JENNIFER LAU

**Honorable Mention, Essay
South High School (Carly Shultz)**

Stonecatching

When I was younger, I had a simple faith in the world and the people in it. It was one that gave me hope, even in the face of adversity. I grew up with people of all backgrounds and ethnicities, and I believed everyone could be friends.

But reality descended harshly on the world I thought I knew. Beginning in high school, I slowly began to lose this optimism. I witnessed how people harnessed their anger and suspicions, even toward the ones they knew the most. I felt like my old view of the world was blind and childish, from when I was too innocent to understand. It seemed like the world stubbornly adhered to its biases and poisonous prejudice. I saw my peers treated unfairly, just because their skin color was different, or because they spoke or dressed differently. The injustice frightened me, so I kept to myself, guarding my vulnerabilities behind barriers of wariness. I confined myself to a box, one that wouldn't let anyone in, but at the same time, one that wouldn't let me out.

In the news, I learned about youth of color who had been tried as adults for crimes that paled in comparison to the heinous crimes committed by adults. Their circumstances were almost entirely out of their control, yet these facts were either never addressed, or they were used against them. Ultimately, I saw how the justice system had turned them into victims because of their race. I cried for them as if they were my best friends, my brothers and sisters, people I would have cherished, people I would have grieved and celebrated with. Regardless of what they had done, it was alarmingly clear that society's practices, which were meant to rehabilitate and vindicate, only fueled more dishonesty and allowed racial biases to fester. Over time, society has become polluted by this festering, and the consequences have surfaced in our justice system, turning it into a tool to crush the spirits of the disadvantaged. I realized that too often we direct our anger toward those who least deserve our wrath.

Then I heard about the concept of stonecatching--showing others mercy that no one else has, giving them a chance to rehabilitate, shielding them from the prejudice people are so quick to show. It was as if the solitary, reinforced cage I'd trapped myself in finally opened again, and I rediscovered the redeeming, wholesome necessity of supporting others who need it the most. It was a conviction beyond anything I'd ever felt. I reconciled with the concept of mercy, with the grace that my faith had taught me to give everyone.

When I was young, I tried to catch the stones that were thrown at the people I loved. My hands were small and my grip was clumsy, but still I succeeded. For all of my life, I was taught to be the bigger person, to give the grace that no one else would and love my enemies. When I became older, my habit changed. I let the stones fall, out of fear of being hurt by them. I did not hate my enemies, but I did not love them either. I refused to throw stones, but I also refused to catch them. In this, I had been blind, blind to the needs of others and to the power of redemption. But now I see the truth. I can become a stonecatcher and strive to bring about redemptive change for people of all races and backgrounds.

Now, I think of our community as a group of stonecatchers in the making. The act of stonecatching is daunting, but we can start small. We'll catch the small stones by encouraging others, making new friends, and showing kindness to strangers. Eventually, we'll master the work of catching larger stones through grieving with those in loss and defending others for what is right despite obstacles and criticism. I know that it requires a strong determination of love and openness to build others up in a way everyone needs despite their past mistakes; that's what mercy truly is.

I ask our community to tirelessly fight for the empathy the world desperately needs. We can be the beacon, the light in the darkness of despair and discrimination. Together we can pursue compassion and justice. Let us embrace what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

MINH NGUYEN

Honorable Mention, Essay
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)

“Wait, so you support him?”

The 2016 Election was such a controversial event for the United States’ history. Everyone had many debates about if the election was valid and trustworthy and if the new President was worthy to become the representative of millions of Americans. When I first heard about the event, it captured my mind. I immediately did much research about the candidate and the future presidents of my country. After finishing my research, I made my choice. But this choice is not the choice that most of my friends want to know.

Living in California, my choice about whether the President was worthy made me the odd one out, not only because of the party but also because I believed his philosophy was true. Every time I had a conversation with a friend, I always tried to dodge the topic. But sometimes, one of my friends asked me if I liked the president.

“Well, I mean... He’s doing okay, right?” I stuttered, afraid that my opinion would break out a debate that would soon after lead to a fight.

“So you’re saying that you’re his supporter?” my friend interrogated me, hoping that I would change my mind.

I gave out my answer, and I received the expression that I expected to see. Most of them acted as if I had just broken all ten Commandments at the same time. Luckily, no fight happened. But what I feared was the way they would think about me in the future. I worried that, because we had a difference in our views in politics, it might separate our friendship.

“I feel like Hillary will become a better President than Trump” one of my friends replied. But, her voice didn’t fill with hatred toward me. She was just simply giving her opinion.

After that, we had our conversation about different topics about political matters such as gun control, border control, etc. It was an interesting conversation for me and my friends since we were learning new things from the other side of the stories. There was no fight happening. What I noticed about the conversation was that we were talking to learn, not to fight.

What makes America one of the greatest countries in the world is that we have freedom of speech, which makes us diverse since we can have many different views of the same problem. This allows us to learn from the other perspectives on the topic that we are following. Every time my friends and I have a conversation about political matters, we are learning from the others. I gave them what is my view, while they give me what they think about the topics, and then we learn about each other. It's not arguing to see who is right or wrong. It's just simply learning from each other.

I still remember my US history class that I took in my Junior year. My teacher wanted each of us to represent a current event to our classmates each week. Many topics were represented, mostly about politics such as gun control, immigration, or abortion. I was the odd one in that class. Most of the people favored the open border, but I believed the opposite. Many of them believed in gun control; I said that we need guns to protect ourselves. Many didn't agree with me, but they didn't hate me for who I am. We had debates sometimes, but those debates didn't lead to a fight outside of the classroom because my classmates and I all understood that we had different perspectives on the same subject and that we were learning from each other.

Now, we are waiting for the 2020 Election. It's either we still have the same President for four more years or there will be a new President. But, in the end, no matter what our philosophy is, no matter whom we support, we all know that the difference in our political perspectives made our country diverse. Diversity is not only about race. It is also about our differing philosophies. Let's stop all the fights we have and sit down, have small conversations, learn from the others, and respect each other.

BRIAN PHAM

**Honorable Mention, Essay
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

The Real Enemy

I am black and Vietnamese. "Blasians" compose less than 1% of the population; we are a minute group of people. My fluency in Vietnamese when contrasted by my dark skin, big lips, and wavy hair is off-putting for most, but I am proud to be multicultural.

Multiculturalism is not a very popular concept. The importance of racial purity and cultural homogeneity is highly valued by many nations, including Vietnam where both of my parents were born. In fact, the Vietnamese government started a program to transport multiracial children to America to eliminate any cultural or racial deviants. My mom was a part of this program.

Americans like to view the US with a touch of arrogance. We like to highlight and flaunt at every waking moment the “melting pot” that exists here. Here, you can find all kinds of different cultures. You can eat Chinese food or walk down the street and have some authentic Italian. Afterwards, you can window-shop at a traditional African clothing store or grab an extra bite at the Mexican food stand. Seems like the opposite of cultural homogeneity, right? While that may be true, the US has many social issues that are often swept under the spectacular rug of ignorance and denial--denial of systemic racism, inequality, and racial divisions in almost every region of the country. No amount of Chinese food can blur the fact that equality still doesn't exist in America; no matter how many times someone brings up the beautiful melting-pot of cultures, I cannot forget the fact that all of the ethnic minorities are shoved into their own little ethnic enclaves--places like Chinatown Town, Little Tokyo, Koreatown, Little Saigon--away from the rest of society, hidden, like an ugly scar.

I grew up resenting white people. I believed they were the source of this prejudice. I believed they were why I was poor, why I was unhappy and hated their seemingly overwhelming abundance of privilege. I looked at them with disgust. I fought hate with hate. I was a bitter person.

Now that I have grown up a bit and have experienced more, I realize now how foolish I was. I fell victim to the common bias and bigotry that plagues society as we know it today--I believed that white people were the enemy. I was no different than Hitler, a fascist and racist dictator who killed six million people, when it came to my ideology. Blaming white people for anything and everything seems to be the popular thing nowadays. But what I came to realize was that minorities (including myself) are just as much to blame for the racial divisions we see within society today. The great thinkers of the modern world understood and subscribed to this philosophy. People like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that change could not happen if you reciprocated that

which you hate. They knew that spreading love, compassion, and a mutual understanding for other people was the key to bringing people closer together. But with the age of social media, emotions become even more intense and fleeting, and people are quick to let loose their frustrations and rage against other people that they have never even met when it comes to social issues.

Society as a whole simply does not care enough about the well-being of the whole. People are quick to point fingers at others and isolate themselves, as if they do not want their own personal life to be tainted by others. We see this in our schools, as kids are conditioned to isolate themselves as individual success appears more valuable to them than collaboration and teamwork. We are creating a society full of individuals, which then translates into the disastrous divisions that we see in our communities.

What people desperately need to understand is that we have the power to change our country for the better. We have the frequently undervalued privilege of voting. With less than half the eligible voters in the US actually voting, the social issues continue to worsen. The enemy isn't white people, or black people, or any category of people for that matter. The real enemy is the people we see standing in the mirror, who, instead of directing their efforts towards social change and activism, direct it towards hate. If we truly want a society with more equality, opportunity, and compassion, then we must act. We have the power to vote for education reform, tax reforms, and political leaders that bring people together. We have the power, if we so choose, to unite in support of a better future. The iPhones, computers, and tablets that we use to attack and belittle other people get stronger, faster, and more perfect every day. Who says people can't also be more perfect?

Poetry

KHUSHI KUMRA

**First Place Poetry
West High School (Carsten Cheung)**

Dear Tired Brown Girl

Dear Tired Brown Girl,

I know you're almost ready to give up,
But hold on a little longer and keep your voice loud.
Hold on for those who haven't found theirs yet,
Who are still lost in this world of hate.

They will beat you down with their words and say
You're too loud, too short, too fat, too dark.
Too smart, too poor, too stubborn, too proud;
You're too much for them, but still never enough.

Dear Tired Brown Girl,

Keep taking one step after another
And don't let them steal your spirit.
Because what they're doing to you,
They're doing to every other immigrant with a dream.

They will tell you you're working too hard;
You have too much ambition and too much drive.
No matter what they say or come what may,
Don't apologize for being who you are.

Dear Tired Brown Girl,

Never apologize for your melanin-infused skin
And the chocolate tint of your eyes.
Never apologize for where you come from;
Wear the roots of your people with pride.

I can see the walls you've built brick by brick
Fall from the veiled insults coming your way.
But I also see your strength as it sparks a fire,
A blaze to light the way for hundreds to follow.

Keep talking because your words are clearing the clouds
In order for us to see their prejudiced ways.
You will never need their validation or their faith,
Because you are always going to be enough.

Sincerely,

A Tired Brown Girl

GISELLE PAMINTUAN

**Second Place Poetry
North High School (Lisa Nichols)**

The Redlining in My Neighborhood

The loud sunshine rings my room into cacophony
My cracked window sends iridescent rays to drift across my face
The neighborhood awakens in sections
For me, it's another day in Red.

I peek out the window, fingers tight on the sill, peeling paint into my nails
Ramshackled buildings grind against the sickening orange sky above me
A glowering sun peeks from the horizon, the red grass it rises from akin to a painful
sunburn
Brown skin peeling only to reveal a white layer inside
The image burned into my retinas as I gingerly touch my own dark
skin.

As I get ready, I wonder how the view looks in Yellow
Would the scorching sun blend in with the cyber grass?
As if the earth was the golden sun itself, the land outside reflecting agonizingly
bright light
A blinding luminescence the same hue as their dirty hands
I stop to detangle my foot caught in a hole in my pants.

But my mind still drifts off to imagine another life, one in the Blue
I think the sun's ray would gently caress the azure blue grass, alongside the people's faces
Would it glow a soft shade of carolina; an explanation for their baby blue skies
above?
Skies that float above sturdy buildings that don't creak and tremble under
the breeze
A world not perfect— but close to it
My bare feet bleed on the sharp barren red soil.

On the other side of the spectrum, paradise resides; here, the supreme roam
Hidden away, as if the rest of the world was ridden by a dirty, nasty, *rancid* disease
Where crisp water pooled in every house, filling mouths up to the brim
Where they feast, where they learn, where they *thrive*
Where people like me are shunned.

Today, I will walk across the whole neighborhood to catch a peek at heaven
I tiptoe along the Red Line, clinging to the deteriorating wired fence that separates us

It crumbles under my tight grip-- the people are rejoicing
But any wrong move can cast me into a monochromic world
I press my head to the coarse fence: breathe, and continue.

I arrive, the Line beneath me a dark blood red-- almost black, unlike the pink trail behind me
Painted over a thousand times, desperate to separate their perfect world from our own
I look over, the tips of my toes barely crossing the Line
I see white picket fences, standing atop the greenest land I have ever seen.

LAUREN AMEZQUITA-QUINTAS

**Third Place Poetry
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

Go Say Hello

Do you see her?
In the lunchroom, sitting in her usual corner
Alone

Book in hand
Munching on her peanut butter and jelly sandwich
This is her third book in two weeks
Amazing, I thought
Go Say Hello

Today in Economics
Her intellectual and interesting point on the future of our society was awe-inspiring
Every single student in our class was interested in what she had to say
We were in her world now
What an imagination
But no one to share those views with?

Go Say Hello

She is the last to be picked up
Before the bus reaches its final destination
Her usual spot, the first seat to the left
Greets her with open arms
Nose buried in another book
Go sit next to her and Say Hello

There she is!
Sitting on the floor, rereading the Harry Potter books
Today is the day
“Hello. My name is Lauren.”

ZAIN MOHAMMAD

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Rachel Lawrence)**

Origins of Unity

Doesn't take much to love, respect, and open your mind
All you gotta do care from the heart
Listen, open, care for the person
Be nice, kind, and treat others well
What can go bad then?
To preach is the only way to reach it
Set an example
Think good about each other
Tolerate mistakes
That's the only way we can make a difference
Just preach it reach it and make sure it kept
Make sure evil people know what the heck
Doesn't take much to love, respect, and open your mind
All you gotta do care from the heart

SHUA CHO

Honorable Mention, Poetry
California Academy of Mathematics and Science (Michele Brennan)

To Tame a Mare

My anger gnashes her teeth, like Neptune's wildest horse she is
Foaming at the mouth, a hundred little droplets of sea licking at the shoreline.
Furious, she tramples the damp, packed sand.
Every grain quietly trembles under her tide,
Which oozes over the land lovingly and murderously.
They were shells once, hard cream memories of names and fear,
Old ideas and new hatred.
I broke each shell down with a veiny, white quartz pestle,
Grinding the beautiful calcium against the inside of my own weathered skull.
And so the tide still rises.

Even the shells are just the exoskeletons of a deep and terrifying bias.
Sometimes I hear a hairy, hungry hermit crab scuttle across my sea and they
Remind me that the words are just echoes of a loathing so loud it had to crawl out.
And so the tide still rises.

The seashell specks I harbour still remember the hatred they housed.
No, my sands are not the victim. No, my sands are not my stable ground--
In fact, they sink around my ankles,
And weigh down my toes by calcifying my struggles.
No, they are not clear as the ocean is clear like algae-speckled glass,
Until their swirling makes us murky.
My sea, when it lulls to a low tide, is tugged at by the moon.
The winds revise her swirling.

She joins other seas and forms new currents, changing the shape of the world's current harbor.

Seaweed wraps around her like a noseband and reins, it transforms the crashing anger into a still, impenetrable horizon.

Salted by the tears and sweat of our past, our mares charge into peaceful battle, A united front against bleached beaches.

No matter how the sands ready themselves for every next wave,
One day, they will wash away.

And so the tide still rises.

CATHERINE WAN

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
South High School (Julie O'Brien)**

A Changing Butterfly

These beautiful fragile wings of a butterfly
So easily plucked from its flitting false frame
Society's fingers clawing without shame
Broken down, so fleeting, flimsy, fraudulent
Nothing more than a shell of a past self

Resting on ivory petals threatening to gulp down this trembling figure
Petals that whisper snarls and sneers
The red vermillion tainting this mirage of purity
A catalyst of chaos in corrupt order

Wings with snapped limbs, quivering in society's eyes
These forlorn wings could not save this lost soul's mind
Succumbing to the cries of society's lies
Ensnaring this mind with no choice but to comply

All who yearn to fly must fall before they learn to rise
A tangible heart pounding along the thread of life
A desperate wish to fight back— a will to be alive
A bittersweet tale of a soul struggling to rise
Only laughter beseeches, from society's eyes

This vision of unity misunderstood mid-flight
United with compassion, kindle this light
Burning with passion and hope of a better life
Only fear holds them back, with a grip soon faltering at this sight

Mindless butterflies fluttering in twisted realities
With only one to tip over this wicked twist of humanity
Whispers of gratitude for those whose dreams carried towards this singular soul
Behold— this essence is fate, built up with generations new and old
A dewdrop of change casting ripples across an ocean
A tree stumbling and falling in a forest where no ears hear its fall
Yet change is miniscule— most reminiscent of all

This lone butterfly, once a mere caterpillar
Transformed into a creature of defiance and determination
Rise up— challenge society and stare down in its guise
Spread your dainty wings and go on
Let go of haunting words and woes gone—
Fly.

SHARALLENE TUNUPOPO

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Lisa Nichols)**

War Baby

He was born and raised in these streets
Call it the hood, the ghetto, the gutta
But to him this was his home--his life

At three years old, he saw his dad leave with the red, white, and blue lights
At four years old, he witnessed his mom take her last puff
At six years old, his older brother, shot in the chest for being in the wrong neighborhood
At nine years old, his older sister, taken and never seen again
At twelve years old, his cousins jumping him, a moment of celebration and acceptance
At fourteen, revenged for his brother's death and killed his best friend's brother

At age eighteen, money was his best friend
His gun was his protective father
The bullets were his defensive brother
His drugs were his comforting mother
His tattoos were his artistic sister
The projects were his home

To all he was a tough guy with thick skin who had no fears
But little did they know, he wasn't afraid to die
He was scared to live
Mom, dad, brother & sis he carved on the dirty wall of his lonely cell
"Survived in the trenches I'm a War Baby" he wrote and sang.

Twenty years later, with his wife and three kids
As they visit the graves of his loved ones,
I survived ma
I'm free dad
I'm onto bigger and better things sis
I made it out bro
The War changed me, I'm a War Baby.

CASEY KWAK

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Anne Galullo)**

Hello, I'm Color

Hello, I'm Asian.

We introduce ourselves based on
race as if it changes something,
as if the color of our skin determines our personalities,
our hopes and dreams,
what we like and do not like.

Hello, I'm Mexican.

We analyze each person's physicalities and
give them a number on a scale. Rating
ten the best,
one the least.

Hello, I'm African.

We focus so much on this color
whether it be raw umber, goldenrod, or peach
that we forget to look within.
That we forget character isn't related to skin.

Hello, I'm American.

Unity is not about the food one eats
or the drinks one drinks.
It is not about making everyone have the same
background, culture, or accent.

Hello, I'm Japanese, Hawaiian, White, and Chinese.

It is about accepting everyone no matter
who they are or where they came from.

It is about appreciating each and everyone
for the heart they have built so carefully.

And finally, we can be satisfied with a simple
hello.

GRAYSON ABRAHAMS

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

KFC

Fried chicken is great

That extra crispy

You just can't imitate

Mashed potatoes, they're so creamy

The biscuits will leave you thirsty

Don't get me started on that sweet corn

Absolute food porn.

Don't get me wrong

All of these foods are great on their own.

But, they're better

When they're all together.

Dipping that crispy, fried chicken,

In those creamy, mashed potatoes.

Oh boy, they make a good combo.

What's even better?

Taking that biscuit,

Putting some of that crispy chicken on there.

Spreading some of those creamy mashed potatoes on there.
Sprinkling some sweet corn on there.
Keeping them away from each other,
Is totally unfair.
Look, doesn't it just taste divine?
Once all of those foods are mixed in and combined,
You don't ever want them to be separate again.
Why keep them apart?
When they're meant to be hand in hand in the end.

YOUSSEF BEBAWY

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Rachel Lawrence)**

A City by the Beach

1. Torrance, a city by the beach
2. The beach with the fish
3. The Sea Bass, the Moon Charts.
4. All seen the same, as fish.
5. The humans that fish, they too are the same.
6. Caucasian, African American, Asian, Mexican.
7. All treated with respect and kindness, as should be.
8. We only live once so why not live it happily.
9. Living it with respect and unity.
10. As we live with one another it brings everyone closer as it also unites the human race. As should be.
11. In Torrance we unite by helping others such as the less fortunate and the mentally and physically gifted.

12. We unite by supporting each other; support in a building is the first step to building it.
13. We humans are the same.
14. War starts by hate; and hate starts with disagreement.
15. So why start wars when we can start peace;
16. Peace around the world!
17. Why don't we set aside our differences and love each other no matter if you're Christian or Muslim, Black or White.
18. In our past we started a war with thousands dead;
19. In Torrance, we learn from our mistakes and don't repeat them.
20. Only positive outcomes come from Love and Peace.
21. In Torrance we have given to those who don't receive.
22. We love the ones who can't love themselves.
23. Most importantly we express kindness no matter who you are.
24. As a result of our loving communities in Torrance, we've established a wonderful, safe city.
25. Torrance's love and kindness all together is better quality of life, as a city we are
26. More diversity has more creativity, we support and inspire.
27. The ocean is full of beautiful life and without it, nothing.
28. We are the life, we are the diversity of fish and coral;
29. We live in unity supporting one another such as
30. the clownfish and sea anemones. We need each other to grow and to protect.
31. The presence of diversity assists the younger generation by growing up with one another
32. This aids their brains of the right way of humanity and disarming their opinions of sexism and racism.
33. Diversity is indeed a beautiful idea; Peace and tranquility. Torrance is exactly that and more!
34. We have strong hearts and work wonderfully together.
35. Unity isn't an idea, it's a lifestyle

DANNIEL SARATE

Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Rachel Lawrence)

Two Eyes

Human nature.

Humans are taught to favor the routine, similarities, and uniform,

Uniform lines of solid faces with one feature alone.

It's only human nature to make it easier,

But at what cost?

We seek power and dominance over unity;

It's programmed into us through evolution; it's scientific.

"Fight or flight" when "fight" is the only option we see.

The human life worth more than another of equal value,

We choose to be biased against one another.

Diversity is a distant dream when there are differences.

It's only human nature.

Differences are woven throughout our bodies and cling to our souls
riddled throughout ourselves are the notches of beauty.

These we hold value and find comfort in,

Every person living and dead, gone and present.

We falter and change, stumble and fall from our pasts and in the presence of the future.

We are taught to love and comfort one another;

With the ever infinite possibilities of the mind, we can find comfort within each other.

Find the strength in the thought of not being alone

With others just like ourselves.

Evolution has given us the ability to empathize with another in pain

And sympathize with those in situations not indifferent from our own.

The nature of humans.

AMTUL MALIK

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Jonathan Sperling)**

A Lasting Light

Everyday terror is met with silence.
Disregarded as the norm.
It becomes a hallway for some and a stage for others.
The stained roll in their dirt, and the innocent stay covered.
The spotlight quickly disintegrates, and with it goes the stage.
Yet the dirt thickens into mud.
Intimidating shadows still the world.
But silence does not always lie with cede.
Now the veil is lifted, the clarity seeped through.
Prayers no longer fit the norm, protest powers through.
Silent suits become foils to their masters.
The colored embrace fear but never in despair.
We stand tall with mountains and never bow to the stars.
Not for us, or them or theirs or ours—a fight for a brighter future has to be the only monarch.

JOURNEY HALL

**Honorable Mention, Poetry
North High School (Rachel Lawrence)**

Holding Hands

The shape of my figure, the texture of my hair, the
pigment of my skin.
Does it matter?

Not seeing color, not seeing wealthy or poor, not
judging

is my way of living.

Nurturing the tears of those who feel as I do, looking up
to those who pick up the broken pieces of others just to
put them back together.

Is this Unity? Or plain kindness?

Both hands Left and Right high in the air, the
movement of the mouth, words gush out.

Don't shoot.

Bullet after Bullet. Life after Life. Breath after Breath.

Rewind the time and reload the bullets. Was it the shape
of my figure, the texture of my hair, the pigment of my
skin?

Do you see ME? Or the image I present?

White, Black, Yellow, Tan, Long, Curley, Curvy, Thin.

No matter your race, sexuality, or color of your skin we
should all stand together and hold hands.

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community supporters, whose vision of unity made this unique
contest possible.