

Opinion,  
essays,  
and vision  
from  
American  
teenagers

# hip deep

EDITED BY ABE LOUISE YOUNG

with the youth board

of Next Generation Press

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from American Teenagers

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NEXT GENERATION PRESS

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*“Each Voice Is an Independent Song”*

## My School, My Path, My Learning

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**I**N SCHOOL, WE FOLLOW CALENDARS and curricula. We walk down marked hallways and respond to hourly bells. Yet our learning is sparked by engagement with an active process—not by simply taking in information. The student writers in this section risk a real relationship with their education: They expect to be engaged as whole people.

Learning often crystallizes in moments when a relationship changes, or when we stand up for something we believe in and wait to see how the world reacts. At turning points, we realize we have learned something so deeply that we will defend it.

The essays and poems in this section illustrate those turning points. John Wood values his education so much that he decides to boycott standardized tests. Candace Coleman looks closely at affirmative action and the role that race plays in higher education. Jane Jiang visits an impoverished school in China, then publishes a book of her poetry to raise scholarship funds for Chinese children. Other students write about learning disabilities, romantic relationships, homophobia and cultural bias, and the aspects of high school that concern and excite them.

The concepts raised in this section are very personal: What do I want to learn? What subjects am I an expert in? Am I intelligent? Why do I enjoy one subject, and avoid another? Who is judging my progress, and do their standards fit with the criteria I use to measure my own success? What am I proud of? What gifts do I have, and what can I teach others?

From crumbling public schools to posh private academies, from jail time to outdoor adventure, students explain how they walk their own paths through learning.

# Will the Tortoise Win the Race?

ERIC GREEN

**E**VERYBODY SAYS YOU NEED TO GRADUATE from high school to succeed in life. But what if you just can't pass your classes? Should you keep trying? I'm twenty years old and I'm still in the eleventh grade. I failed ninth grade once and failed tenth grade three times. I'm not sure I'll ever graduate.

Until ninth grade, I was in special education classes. In elementary school, I felt like the smartest kid in the class. I was a straight A student. In junior high, I constantly got 100's on spelling quizzes, and sometimes made the honor roll.

In sixth grade, I started to have trouble for the first time. When my math teacher called me up to the board to solve a problem, I was the slowest one to finish in the whole class. Some of my teachers yelled and screamed at me. One teacher called me "slow" and "stupid." I began to hate her and think of myself as stupid. On good days, I'd tell myself, "I'm smart, just not as quick as other people."

In the ninth grade, I got switched to regular classes and went to the resource room for extra help. In my regular classes, students talked down to kids in special ed. I'd think, "That's where you're wrong. I go to resource room because I have a learning disability, and I'm willing to get as much help as possible." But I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to get teased even more.

That year, my biological mom died. My mind was not on school at all. Suddenly school was too hard. I seemed to have lost my ability to understand the work. I began to think I was not intelligent enough to pass

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*Eric Green's essay "Will the Tortoise Win the Race?" was first published in Represent magazine, a publication for young people in the foster care system. He wrote it at age twenty.*



high school classes. I would sit in class looking at the assignment while everyone else completed theirs. Sometimes when I took an assignment seriously I'd do well. Then I'd feel proud and confident. Most of the time, though, I'd become overwhelmed and frustrated.

Once, in math class, I got extra help and did all of my assignments. When I got my report card, I saw that my math teacher had given me a 65.

“Why did you give me a 65?” I asked him.

“You didn't do well on the exams,” he said.

I was furious. Didn't he know I was working as hard as I could? Didn't he understand how it feels to try hard but not be rewarded or recognized? I thought I deserved a better grade because of my effort, even if I couldn't do well on the tests.

Situations like that made me feel neglected by my teachers. Growing up, my parents and my first foster parent neglected me. My biological parents would disappear without a trace and leave my siblings and me in the house for hours. They didn't seem to notice who I was or what I needed.

I felt the same way when my teachers overlooked the efforts I made, or stood by while other kids in the class teased me and called me names. I felt that some of my teachers did not want to deal with me anymore and didn't pay attention to me when I asked for help. I felt lonely and isolated and stuck with problems that I couldn't solve.

Eventually, I stopped asking for help. I'd feel stupid any time I tried to complete a difficult task. I stopped believing that I could ever pass, even if I got all the extra help in the world. I thought I'd never be a successful person. Then I began to refuse to do classwork. I'd spend my time writing poems or drawing pictures—two things I know I'm good at. When the teacher asked me about the assignment I was supposed to be doing, I'd have nothing to show.

I hoped that my teachers would notice that I was angry, or lost. But when I took my adoptive mother, Lorine, to my parent-teacher conferences, my teachers only seemed frustrated. One teacher told her, “Eric is a very talented poet and artist, but he doesn't do the work that is required of him. He just sits in the back of the classroom and writes his poems. He is

very inattentive and uncooperative. He's a nice young man. I know he can do better."

Lorine said, "You see, that's the same exact thing that I be telling him. He gets mad and starts to cop an attitude. He doesn't like to study, or do his homework. Every day he just comes home and sits on the floor and draws and writes poems." Every teacher we met told my mother the same thing. Even my art teacher, whose class is my favorite, told her, "Eric is not paying attention in class, he does not do the assignments. Eric does what he wants to do."

I felt embarrassed because it was the truth. One day in my art class, the task was to draw a still-life of a bowl of fruit. While the rest of the class was drawing the fruit, I was doing my own drawings, because I only like to draw self-portraits, cartoon characters and washing machines. I knew that I should do what was asked of me instead of being troublesome. But when Lorine asked me why I wouldn't cooperate with my teachers, I was too embarrassed to come out with the reason for my behavior—that I felt like a failure. So I said, "I believe that school should suit my interests. I don't understand how learning math will help me become a poet or an artist!" Finally, the anxiety and the feeling of wasting my life got to be too much. I told my mother, "I am dropping out." "If you decide to drop out of high school, then you can leave this house and live with someone else," Lorine said.

Luckily, my counselor helped me transfer to a smaller high school where I could get more attention. I thought that in a better environment I would do better in school and be able to go forward in life. At first, I was more focused and willing to do the work. The teachers went out of their way to help me, and the students were respectful and easy to get along with.

My counselor also explained to me that having a learning disability is different from being dumb. "When you're a smart person with a learning disability, you can master an academic curriculum if you have plenty of assistance and you work hard. A dumb person is one who is unwilling to participate in classes or stick to the curriculum," she said.

Lately, though, I've run into some new obstacles. In New York, you

have to pass certain exams to graduate. I've taken some of those exams—in history and English—and I've failed all of them, some more than once. And last year, I was looking through my file and I found out that I'd been diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome. I looked that up on the Internet and found out that it's a problem affecting children whose mothers drank a lot while they were pregnant. It listed these characteristics:

- difficulty getting along with friends and family
- mental retardation
- growth deficiencies
- behavior problems
- incomplete education

Looking at the list, I thought to myself, “Do those traits describe me? Is there something wrong with me?” I felt depressed. I feared that I might never be a normal student and might never graduate from high school. I felt angry that my biological mother drank (I remember her drinking when I lived with her). I also worried that my brothers might have the same thing.

I went home and told Lorine what I had read and how I felt. She refused to believe it. She told me, “Eric, you're smart and you should not use that diagnosis as an excuse.” I also told some of my teachers, who told me, “You need to have confidence in your abilities. You have potential and the intelligence to succeed. You're smart, creative, artistic and unique. You write beautiful poetry. Do not punish yourself like that, Eric. Believe in yourself.”

Right now, I'm not sure what to believe about myself. Some days I feel smart and hopeful, other days I'm discouraged. On those days, I don't even try to work toward graduation. I just sit in my classes, drawing and writing poetry. Those are my talents, and when I look at the words and pictures I've created, I feel like it doesn't matter if I succeed in high school or not.

Still, if I don't graduate, I'll feel like a fool for letting myself and my family and friends down. I'm a smart person, I want to succeed, and everybody's in my corner. My friends tell me, “Your mother is right to be upset with you. You need an education.” My mom tells me, “I want to see you with that paper in your hand.”

I want to see that, too.

# Given Sunlight and a Certain Care

JANE S. JIANG

At six years old I wanted  
To know if trees had souls.  
Later, if souls  
Had trees—living things, growing,  
Planted somewhere deep  
Inside and inexplicable.  
And then one day my revelation  
My decision, I don't know which:  
That trees *were* souls. No difference now—  
I saw that they react the same,  
Given sunlight and a certain kind  
of care: the response was always growth.  
It followed naturally and  
proved inevitable.

Each turned in its own  
direction as the saplings bent  
toward different things, their own  
Offering to what  
the world had to give.  
We all start as seeds.

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*Jane S. Jiang is a seventeen-year-old poet, the author of This Odyssey, a book of poems published in 2005. She lives in Seattle, Washington. This poem was commissioned by her high school.*

# The Power of Silence

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STEPHANIE COMPTON

**7**:00 P.M. OCTOBER 24, 2003. Dressed in black bandanas, white t-shirts, jeans, tennis shoes, and sunglasses, six girls walked into an MBA football game carrying red carnations. When peers said hello to these girls, they did not reply. They carried solemn faces, and blank stares hidden behind dark sunglasses...

... As these sober faces walked by, bystanders read their t-shirts. On the front they read "GONE: Ghost Out Night Effect." On the back, there were three different messages. Two shirts read, "Friends kill friends when they drink and drive." Three more read, "One night, one party, one split second, one more life taken by drunk driving." Finally, one shirt had a gravestone drawn with the words, "R.I.P: How can I rest in peace if you still drink and drive?" written on it.

These "ghosts" spread out amidst the crowd. One stood in front of the cheerleaders, silently drawing eyes from the red and white pom-poms to the message that she was promoting. Another stood in the middle of her tight huddle of friends. Instead of gossiping about the week, she merely stared blankly at the field, forcing her friends to not only see her, but to figure out a way to get around this being that stood in their way. Two more stood only feet from the entrance completely still. Each young kid that walked in hesitantly tugged on his/her parent's coat, staring fearfully at the "ghosts" while asking, "Mom, who are they?" The parents in turn would ask, "Excuse me, what are you doing?" When the "ghosts" made no response,

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*Stephanie Compton grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, and attended Compton High. Her essay was first published on Teen Edge, at [www.teenedge.com](http://www.teenedge.com), when she interned as a writer there.*

the parents would read the t-shirts, and tell their children, “These girls are against drunk driving. We’ll talk about it in the car.”

The final ghost walked through the crowd at an abnormally slow pace. Finally, she sat down amid the parents. Most of the parents stared at this odd sight, and some questioned severely, “What are you doing?” When they received no answer from the ghost, they grew frustrated at being dis-regarded by a teenager. “Why won’t you answer me? What good are you doing if you don’t talk?” they asked. Eventually, someone from behind would answer, “Read her shirt, she’s against drunk driving.” Another parent sitting in front would say, “The front says, ‘Ghost Out Night Effect.’ She must be acting like a ghost and cannot talk to us.” At this point, the ghost would stand up, and move to another position in the crowd to continue to spread the message.

When first deciding to participate in such an activity, I thought it would be incredibly difficult to go a whole night being completely silent, and completely expressionless. There were people at that game who I had not seen or talked to in years that I had to walk right by without even acknowledging their presence. There were family friends who had no idea what we were doing, and were insulted by the fact that I had completely ignored them. Many friends were hurt when they extended a friendly greeting and were answered by a cold brush-off. Why did we do something that seemed to hurt so many people?

Actions speak louder than words. This saying has been repeated relentlessly throughout my lifetime. On one October night, I found that putting this cliché to the test was both difficult and rewarding. In our culture, actions do speak louder than words, especially silent actions. We are a visual culture that is increasingly stimulated by image, and image alone. As the six of us sat among the crowd, we reminded everyone that drinking and driving could affect any one of us, and if it does, it will be painful. By acting like the victims of drunk driving accidents, we forced the crowd that night to think what it would really be like to be directly affected by such a tragedy.

Caroline, who was acting as a ghost, was greeted by her close friend Lindsay, as soon as she walked in the door. Lindsay smiled warmly and tried to speak to Caroline. When Caroline did not answer, Lindsay grabbed Caroline's arm and angrily asked, "Why aren't you talking to me? What's wrong?" Caroline ripped her arm from Lindsay's grasp and walked on.

Lindsay, like many of my peers, had no idea what we were doing when they arrived at the game. But, when they returned home, undoubtedly, many found themselves in conversations with their parents, who had questions about the six ghost-like girls that were roaming the crowd. By silently making a statement, our message found its way to the lips of hundreds of students and parents alike.

The six of us could have just as easily run around the track screaming "Drunk driving kills," and we probably would have turned more heads. Instead, we took a seemingly more subtle approach which in turn made our message more direct and more personal as each person saw us walk by and was forced to figure out exactly what we were doing and why we were there.

If you have a message that you want to get out, don't be afraid to use your voice. In our culture though, you must use it creatively to get people's attention. To be the most effective, engage your audience's mind and emotion. After all who would you be more likely to take to heart, the screaming picketer who will not let you pass, or the ghostly friend who can only sit and stare?

# Daniel's Letter

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DANIEL OMAR ARANIZ

**M**Y NAME IS DANIEL OMAR ARANIZ. I am a junior at Watertown High School. My parents, Juan and Maria Araniz, are immigrants from South America. I would like to talk about finding family in places you would least expect it and in places you would most expect it.

When I was in the third grade, my teacher, Beth Coughlin, called on me to read aloud. I could not. I felt embarrassed and ashamed, but especially angry that no one had noticed my problem until now. From kindergarten until second grade, I was in a large, multi-grade classroom with the same teacher for three years. My parents, struggling with working and their own weak English, couldn't help me. I had been missed, neglected, ignored.

When Mrs. Coughlin discovered my problem, she made a goal for herself and me; I was going to learn how to read by the time I left the third grade. Mrs. Coughlin wasn't the only person who reached out to me at this time. In the third grade I met my best friend. I did not know it at the time, but he and his family would become a big part of my life. His mother was shocked to find out that I could not read and joined in the effort to teach me.

This made me understand something very important about my family. My dad was never there for me when I was young. He was not there when I woke up in the morning, he was not there when I got home from school, and he was not there when I went to bed. He never went to any of my school activities or even conferences with my teachers. He was not there when I was having trouble learning to read. Instead, he was at work in a factory that makes Christmas ornaments. He would leave the house at six o'clock in the morning and come home at eleven o'clock at night. The only

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*Daniel Omar Araniz wrote his essay "My Search" as a thank-you letter to the Summer Search Foundation, after his sophomore year in high school.*



real reason I knew I had a dad was that he would call at dinner time to tell us he was staying at work for overtime, and on the weekend, exhausted by the week's work, he would do nothing but sleep. I saw the effect of this on my sisters. Not having a father figure, they made some bad choices when they were younger. I believe I would have followed the same path as my sisters, but my surrogate family was there to help. As the years went on, I became closer and closer to them, and soon I began to consider them my second family. At first, my mother was skeptical about this. She wondered why I was always out of the house. I thought she might have even been a little hurt.

Soon something would happen that would make my parents have to lean on this family too. My family was evicted from the house that we had been living in for twelve years. Being evicted meant having to leave Watertown altogether. When I first found out about it, I was heartbroken and ashamed. The first person I told would be a person that I did not even consider a friend, my wrestling coach. After a hard practice, he asked jokingly who was not going to sign up for the team next year. I told him I could not and the reason why. I did not know it then, but this was a smart choice. My coach decided to spread the word of my eviction, and he was able to set up an interview for my family with the director of public housing. The director greeted my parents with a handshake, but when he saw me, a large smile came across his face and I wondered why. He told me he had gotten letters from people all around Watertown telling him about me, and why I should be allowed to stay in my town. I never felt more important than at that moment. With my dad's good credit history and the letters that people sent in, my family's name was placed near the top of the list for the next available house.

# Why I Won't Graduate

JOHN WOOD

**T**HIS SUNDAY IS MY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION. However, despite being ranked sixth in my class, I will not be crossing the stage and my dad, our high school principal, will not be giving me a diploma. I did not drop out at the last minute and I was not expelled. I won't be graduating because I refused to take the Ohio Proficiency Tests. I did this because I believe these high-stakes tests (which are required for graduation) are biased, irrelevant, and completely unnecessary.

The bias of these tests is demonstrated by Ohio's own statistics. They show consistently that schools with high numbers of low income and/or minority students score lower on state tests. It is argued (in defense of testing) that this is not the test's fault, that the scores are only a reflection of the deeper social economic injustices. This is very likely true. What makes the test biased is the fact that the state does little or nothing to compensate for the differences that the students experience outside the classroom. In fact, the state only worsens the situation with its funding system. Ohio's archaic school funding system underfunds schools in poorer areas because it is based on property taxes. The way we fund our schools has been declared unconstitutional four times, and yet the state legislature refuses to fix the problem.

The irrelevance of these tests is also demonstrated by state statistics—in this case, the lack of them. In thirteen years of testing, Ohio has failed to conduct any studies linking scores on the proficiency test to college acceptance rates, college grades, income levels, incarceration rates, dropout rates,

---

*John Wood is a 2005 nongraduate of Federal Hocking High School, in Stewart, Ohio. "Why I Won't Graduate" first appeared in his local newspapers in Ohio: the Athens Messenger and the Athens News.*

scores on military recruiting tests, or any other similar statistic. State officials have stated that it would be too difficult or costly to keep track of their students after high school but I find this hard to believe. My high school is tracking my class for five years with help from the Coalition of Essential Schools. Certainly the state with all its bureaucrats could do the same.

Both of these factors, the test's biases and irrelevance, contribute to making it unnecessary. This system is so flawed it should not be used to determine whether or not students should graduate. More importantly, a system already exists for determining when students are ready to graduate. The ongoing assessment by teachers who spend hours with the students is more than sufficient for determining when they are ready to graduate. However this assessment is being undermined by a focus on test preparation which has eliminated many advanced courses and enrichment experiences. Additionally, since the tests do not and cannot measure things such as critical thinking, the ability to work with others, public speaking, and other characteristics of democratic citizenship, these are pushed aside while we spend more time memorizing for tests.

After almost a decade and a half of testing many people cannot imagine what could be done in place of high-stakes testing, but here in southeastern Ohio alternative assessments are alive and kicking. At my school, Federal Hocking High School, every senior has to complete a senior project (I built a kayak), compile a graduation portfolio, and defend their work in front of a panel of teachers in order to graduate. These types of performance assessments are much more individualized, authentic, and are certainly difficult, something I can attest to, having completed them myself. There may be a place for standardized testing in public education, but they should not be used to determine graduation.

It is because of these reasons I decided to take a stand against the Ohio Proficiency Tests even though it would cost me my graduation and diploma. But why such a drastic measure? The reason is simple—someone has to say no. Education is the key to maintaining our democracy, and I have become disgusted by the indifference displayed by lawmakers who make statements about the value of public education while continuing

to fail to fairly and adequately fund it or commit to performance-based assessments.

I have written a number of state senators and representatives from both parties recommending the state allow districts to set alternatives to high-stakes tests for graduation. Having done everything required for graduation but take the tests, I thought I would provide them an opportunity to rethink testing. Sadly, I have not received a response from any of them, even after personally approaching and rewriting them.

What this has taught me is that one voice is not enough, and to make a difference in our democracy the people must speak with a unified voice. I encourage everyone concerned about the damage being done by high-stakes testing and inadequate funding of public education to speak out. Join me in just saying no to high-stakes testing.

# Forging the Knife

ALICE NAM

I COULD LIVE IN A STORY. I am one of those hopeless romantics who like nothing better than to nestle under an apple tree, open a book, and pour myself into its pages; and one of my favorite novels is *Volume Three, The Amber Spyglass*, of Phillip Pullman's book *His Dark Materials*. Early in the plot, a boy named Will finds himself in possession of a knife that can open windows in parallel universes. However, a series of events driven by the glorious impossibility of fantasy causes the magical blade to shatter; a vagabond king with expertise in metals agrees to help Will repair the knife, but Will finds himself also playing an enormous role in this task. As the king smolders and tempers the pieces, he must understand the exact placement of each atom and feel the overlap between the jagged edges. If one molecule is not aligned, the shattered shards will fall back onto the cold ground, broken.

I also have a passion for classical music unusual for the typical angst-y teen. Eleven years of training on the classical piano have taught me how to fall in love to Schumann's Concerto in A Minor, dance away to Chopin's Ballade No. 4, or brood over the anguish of Beethoven's *Appassionata*. When I was younger and Sebastian was a friendly crab in *The Little Mermaid*, Johann Sebastian Bach's work was a special favorite of mine. However, as I have grown older, the process of interpreting his music has proven to be much more complicated than I had realized.

*The king looked closely at each piece, touching it delicately and lifting it up to turn it this way and that.*

Before I can touch a single key on the piano, I sit alone with a library

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*Alice Nam has lived in North Andover, Massachusetts all her life. She wrote "Forging the Knife" for her sophomore English class at Phillips Academy, Andover.*

photocopy of Fugue in G Minor, from Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, at the newly polished kitchen table. With green, blue, orange, and yellow highlighters, I isolate and trace each of the four voices: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. Bach's music is polyphonic, meaning that it lacks a melody with accompanying chord harmony. Each voice is an independent song that weaves in and out to create a larger tapestry. Singing by ear without the aid of an instrument is the best way to familiarize myself with each part. Occasionally, I dash over to the piano and double-check to see if I am still on tune.

*He set the first two pieces of the blade of the subtle knife among the fierce-burning wood at the heart of the fire.*

Once I can sing each line fluently, I open the piano and attempt to match the articulation of the instrument to my voice. When the music demands legato, the sound from each note must blend smoothly with the next. I must memorize the exact pressure from each finger, the precise placement on the key and the proper posture. Pedaling should be applied at the last millisecond that a note sounds and removed the moment the next begins. For staccato, each finger lightly graces the key, strokes down and back with lightning speed, and repeats for how many hundreds of notes scatter the page. Line by line, voice by voice, I weed out each part and commit it to memory.

*Moving with extraordinary speed, he adjusted the angle at which the pieces overlapped.*

Next, I attempt to sing one voice while correctly articulating another on the instrument. I usually bring a glass of water so that my voice does not crack by the time I forget whether I am on soprano-tenor or tenor-bass. Slumping onto the keys, I sort through the score and find the interval between each voice and the difference in articulation. The work is horribly tedious but painfully necessary.

*The king roared above the clangor. "Hold it in your mind! You have to forge it too! This is your task as much as mine!" Will felt his whole being quiver under the blows of the stone hammer.*

The day of the New England Piano Teacher's Association Recital fogs into a gray morning. I walk across the wooden stage, my heels clicking loudly against the floorboards. Placing one hand on the six-foot Steinway, I bow politely, and the audience claps as part of the protocol. I adjust the bench, check my skirt to make sure it does not snag, and close my eyes. This is the final step. I hear the colors, the pink, the lilac, the baby blue, the passionate red, the individual atom of each voice, the ribbons of metal that fuse together and the snap of silver ridges, and I seize control of the articulation, the finger work, staccato, legato, stroke, and the brush. Four voices, four shards, four stories, four lives, and I must hold them all in my mind. I open my eyes.

And I am holding a knife that can open the window in worlds.

# Sex with Seniors: No Fairytale for Freshmen

ÉLAN JADE JONES

**A** FEW DAYS AGO, as I was standing in the lunch line to purchase one of my school's delicious platters of toxic waste, two freshman girls stood behind me, talking. I wasn't really paying attention to their conversation (I'm really not the type to eavesdrop), but what one of the girls said really caught my attention. Her exact words were: "I don't really want to do it, but he's a senior, so if I do, it'll make him and other seniors like me."

Now, I know they could have been talking about anything (maybe she didn't want to help him cheat on a test or something simple like that), but the tone in her voice made me believe "it" was something sexual.

I don't know why, but suddenly I felt extremely angry at her. Why would she think that she had to do anything for someone just because he's a senior? Why did she feel it was so important to have the seniors like her anyway? I couldn't understand her reasoning until I thought back to when I was a freshman and desperate for the same acceptance of the allegedly larger-than-life upperclassmen.

For freshmen, the abrupt transition from eighth to ninth grade is already hard enough, with the drastic change in homework. On top of that, supposedly you're automatically at the bottom of the social ladder. So now you're a prime target for humiliation from anyone who can say they've been in high school longer than you, which, unfortunately, is everyone. It's a common misconception that the only way to avoid this humiliation and being branded an outcast is to give in to the pressure to have sex.

There are so many freshmen in my school who feel that it is a social

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*Élan Jade Jones is a staff writer for Sex, Etc., an award-winning national newsletter and web site that is written by teens, for teens, on teen sexual health issues. She wrote this essay at age seventeen.*



taboo to turn down the advances of seniors; they feel it will leave them friendless their entire high-school career. This couldn't be further from the truth. Seniors—or anyone else—do not have the right to take advantage of you just because you are new to the school. Unfortunately, many seniors count on freshman girls to be too intimidated by them to say “no” to sex. Some girls agree to have sex or perform oral sex, hoping that the next day in school that senior will wave to them in the hallway or invite them to sit at their lunch table. Then, they'll be one of the “cool” freshmen with a bunch of senior friends, and everything will be perfect.

Sadly, the reality of the situation is not a fairytale. More likely, a freshman will agree to have sex with a senior, and the next time the two people pass each other in school, it will be as though the girl doesn't even exist. He'll walk right past her without saying “hello” or even making eye contact. She'll just be known as another freshman he conquered.

Freshman guys reading this may think that this doesn't apply to them, but that's not the case. Both girls and guys deal with pressure from their peers. A freshman guy may feel he has to get involved with a lot of girls, because he thinks that is the only way to win the approval of male seniors.

So, what happens when freshmen give in to sexual pressure? There can be long-lasting effects after casual sexual encounters, especially if two partners didn't use protection. If they had oral, vaginal, or anal sex without it, one of the partners could get pregnant or get a sexually transmitted infection.

The effects are not just physical, though. If teens start thinking that the only reason seniors want to be their friend is to have sex, their self-esteem will plummet. They might just think that seniors only like them for the “sexual benefits.” It's important to understand that if two people truly want to be friends, they accept each other for their personalities.

I'm not saying that all seniors are evil and you should avoid them like the plague. I'm sure you'll meet some really great seniors who honestly want to be your friend or date you, and you should try to hang around those types of people.

I know that being a freshman can be, for lack of a better word, scary.

But don't let that fear allow you to make decisions you may regret later in your life. There is no rule that says you have to have sex once you enter high school. Don't let others dictate when you're ready to have sex or do anything else. Wait until you are certain that you're ready and you're not doing it so people will like you or just to fit in. Saying "no" to something you're not comfortable with won't turn you into an outcast. It will show people that you're not some naïve freshman they can pressure, and they will respect you for that. And even if you're labeled an outcast, the people who will actually make great friends won't care about some unimportant label.

High school can be a fun experience, as long as you take it at your own pace. And before you realize it, you'll be a senior, remembering how foolish it was for you to be scared.

# Politic Football

DANIEL KLOTZ

I'VE NEVER DECIDED if I actually miss playing football. I played tight end and outside linebacker for one season, during my freshman year of high school. The previous winter I'd lifted weights often enough for a junior high kid, then I long-jumped in track during the spring and kept in good condition all summer. I was no all-out beast, but for me it was decent dedication.

Our coach, Mr. Noble, was horrible. I respected the hell out of him at the time, and so did everyone else—he was six-five and had some serious guns. He'd contrive a good practice with the assistant coaches for ten minutes every day while we ran the perimeter of the practice field, a workout monotonous as recopying history notes. We were in better shape than any other team in the county, but we couldn't play football worth a lick.

I started in one or two games toward the end of the season after the first-string tight end, Mitch, fractured his wrist, and before the second-string fullback, Eric, learned the position. Like all of the only-half-decent guys, I played special teams every game. Problem was, I sucked at blocking because I had no girth, and I couldn't catch very well because all we ever practiced was blocking. In games, we almost always ran the ball. Our tailback, Conor, kicked butt. He'd have been even better if our coach didn't make him run stupid plays all the time. We'd be fourth and eight at our own 35, and Coach Noble—he made us address him as "sir" all the time ("Yes, sir," "I don't understand, sir," "Sir, I have to leave practice early tomorrow, sir")—would tell Hildebrand, the QB, to call a blast, an off-guard run right up the middle.

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*Daniel Klotz graduated from high school in 2004. He is the founding editor of Frodo's Notebook, an international online journal for teen writing, where his essay "Politic Football" was published.*

Conor would've been better, too, if the linemen, such as myself, had skill as well as endurance. There's a picture in the yearbook from that season that makes me feel like a loser every time I see it—Conor's charging through the line, and I'm on my feet with my knees bent and no one to block, my guy diving for the tackle. Man, I really handled him.

Maybe things will change after I graduate, but sometimes I feel like I never deserved to keep playing, that I never would have been good enough to have any real confidence in my ability. But then I go to a Friday night varsity game and the stands are on their feet as the team charges onto the field under lights blazing against a solid black sky and I think, that could be me out there jumping around, pulse racing, hollering.

There are many reasons I signed up to play football, some are stupid and some are good, and one of the good ones was to experience the whole team thing—we're gonna take on our opponents and smash 'em into the ground. There are also many reasons I decided not to play the next year, and one of them was that I never got the feeling of being a team. For me, two and a half hours of practice every day meant struggling to tell my body I could do it, trying to stop being so mechanical about blocking, and busting my butt to catch up with people who'd been playing since fifth grade. It also meant never being as good as the real starters, most of whom had no work ethic but ground us second- and third-stringers into the practice field dust when they got the chance. These players were already getting drunk and laid on the weekends.

I tried really hard to make that sense of team happen, mostly by getting more charged up than just about everyone (except maybe Ardon, the team's token black guy, who would go bananas) and helping the whole team to get psyched for a game. "Who we gonna beat this week?" became our mantra. One of us would yell it, and the rest of the team would bellow back the name of our upcoming opponent, if we could remember it. Then whoever hollered the question would repeat it, and we'd get louder. Noble would get really pissed when someone popped the question at a Monday practice and (with our games on Thursdays) we answered too tentatively, or with the names of a couple teams. I took a sort of inane pride in adding "I said . . ." and "I can't

hear you” to the mix, which caught on fast. Of course, the toughness was drained whenever the voice of whoever was leading the yell cracked in mid-sentence, which happened frequently with all of us aged fourteen or fifteen.

I tell people all the time that I miss playing. It kind of makes up for the fact that I stopped. You’re supposed to like being an athlete in high school. Adults appreciate sports, especially in central Pennsylvania. Student council, current issues club, and a student newspaper are unsure ground. So I would say, “No, I used to play, but not this year.” I avoid saying I only played one season three years ago whenever possible.

I try to make up for this apparent fault as well as I can. At least once a year I get serious about working out, hitting the weight room three days a week, running distance, erasing any sign of a gut or a filling-out face. I keep the routine long enough to regain what I’ve lost—until I plateau on increments of what I can lift, can run five miles or so without stopping, and build enough of a camaraderie with the rest of the guys in the weight room that I don’t feel awkward asking someone for a spot. Then I just sort of stop. Not all of a sudden, but slowly, like losing interest in a girl.

It makes me feel better to know simply that I can do it, that I can control my body if I wish to. When I’m not pursuing any particular girl, it makes me feel better to get a good glimpse of a girl and know that I’m still in shape as far as being attracted to women and liking the idea of female in general. I don’t have to continually prove to myself that I can date a girl and enjoy it and build a meaningful relationship—it’s enough just to know that I could if I wanted to. The same is true as far as being an athlete.

Excusing my decision not to play was easy the year after I quit. I stayed in the weight room all fall, and ran track that spring. All I had to say was, “I’m thinking about playing again next year,” and nod to a remark about yeah, you should. Piece of cake. Now I have to work harder—promise long articles and big pictures in the school newspaper to my friends on the team (I have a terrible record of delivering on those promises), agree to allot student activities funds for team equipment, or make a comment proving how closely I’ve followed their season.

In general, I’m pretty content with that relationship. Sure, it’s

awkward. It's certainly not genuine, and I usually toss relationships that aren't genuine out the window. But it's true high school politics, and it charges me up. I love it. There's a grave misconception that the politics of high school involve going out with the right person and making it to the good parties and dressing well. It's actually being able to take a question like "Why aren't you playing football?" (or, for that matter, "How come you weren't at the party Friday?" or "Who do you have your eye on?") and give a horribly inadequate two-sentence answer that still satisfies the other person. That's where it's at. And it's great.

One day soon, my peers will probably stop asking why I don't play anymore altogether.

Which bothers me in a weird way, perhaps hinting at one of the reasons I played for that one year: to gain political sway. It is, after all, useful for far more than excusing myself for not playing football. It's good for getting people to latch onto my dreams and visions, to feel honored by my praise, to seek my advice and feedback. In short, in high school it's good for validating me as a genuine leader. That's the paradox of football, too. When Conor made great runs, the respect and recognition he received grew. But at the same time, the whole team advanced five, ten, twenty yards towards the end zone and a win. On the field, I was no star. I tried to push back defenders and contain the outside run, but my success was limited. In the hallways of the high school, though, I was able to make those important political plays with power and agility. And I've been charged up by the wins ever since. That confidence and fulfillment didn't come until after I'd decided to stop playing football, and effects can't be their own causes. Unless, of course, that paradox is true, too.

# One Hundred Faces

JANE S. JIANG

I HAD NEVER BEFORE TRULY BELIEVED in the power of words. Writing is my consuming passion, an action that I know to be both cathartic and inspiring. But to actually use words to effect sweeping, *tangible* change? That was a distant concept I only half-understood. Somehow I had never pictured myself using writing to affect the world around me in a way beyond the purely abstract and theoretical. Call it skepticism, if you like; this would all soon change.

I am a well-traveled girl, a cosmopolitan one; in 26 countries I have seen everything from glass-and-mirror halls in Versailles to twig-and-tin shacks in Belize. I understood poverty, I'd thought. I did my part in food drives, clicked every day on The Hunger Site, and believed myself not an entirely unredeemed human being. But it is not an exaggeration to say that this summer my worldview shifted dramatically.

My ninth trip to China was different from those before. Not only was I without my parents, I came with a school group focusing on “global service learning.” This meant uncomfortable homestays, minimal tourism, and teaching English at local elementary schools. As I contrasted futuristic Shanghai with a dusty, impoverished Southwestern village called Nanyao, a new face of China emerged. Generosity was no longer donating a bag of canned food for distant “starving African babies,” but killing a prized chicken to provide the American guests with meat in a household of cabbage and rice. Poverty became the chapped faces of runny-nosed children, tanned so dark that grime went unseen on their arms. Normalcy became

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*Jane S. Jiang is the editor of her high school's literary magazine, Imago. She wrote this piece to accompany her poetry book, This Odyssey, which she sells from her mother's acupuncture office.*

leaving school after sixth grade, struggling families unable to afford boarding fees at the nearest middle school, a day's drive away.

The problems were as real in any African village as they were in Nanyao, but Nanyao bore a face, indeed bore hundreds of faces. Laughing faces, whining faces, smiling faces, angry faces, sixth-grade faces set off by the red neckerchiefs of high accomplishment and saddened by the knowledge of no more to come . . . I can imagine them as I write, eleven- and twelve-year-old children learning to say “school” while they remember that this is their last year to learn. These were no Internet photographs or PowerPoint presentations, but a trenchant chord of reality.

Upon my return, I published a book of my best forty poems for the cause. In three days I have raised over \$500 by word-of-mouth sales; in the next weeks I will be visiting bookstores to fulfill my goal of \$2,000. In China's web of educational castes, this opens the hundred-odd faces of Nanyao to undreamed-of horizons.

I said before that I had not believed in the true power of words; the emphasis here is on “had.” Nanyao reminded me that my education was nothing short of a gift, and her undeveloped talents then pushed me to utilize of my own well-honed craft. Today I see writing from a new perspective: not merely words for the sake of words, or language for the sake of art, but—however distant or cliché or implausible it may sound—art also for the sake of making a human change, because I have.



# A Coach's Word

JAMES SLUSSER

**W**HEN I WAS A SOPHOMORE in high school, I, like a lot of teens, struggled with my sexuality. Being somewhat “feminine” growing up, I was used to the taunting of my peers. I was used to the snickering and name-calling. Over time, I had learned to turn the tables, unleashing a razor tongue on anyone who dared to put me under the microscope. I had become a campus legend as “the gay boy who is too funny to hate.”

But any security that I felt, any safety that I had managed to create for myself, was shattered by someone I never even suspected. One afternoon, as I broke away from PE class roll call, my friend Jenny approached me. She looked distressed.

“Did you hear what he said?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Coach.” Jenny paused. “Coach. He called you a ‘faggot’ when you passed by.”

A group of students gathered around, confirming what Jenny said. I laughed, sure that it was a misunderstanding. They followed me as I approached Coach, his back to me, laughing with some jocks in the class. He turned and looked at me with a smirk on his face.

“Coach, did you . . .” I stammered. “Did you call me a ‘faggot?’”

“Yep,” he chirped, without pause.

My heart began to beat like a drum. I couldn't believe—or comprehend—that he would confess to such a horrible thing without remorse. The jock boys began to chuckle and whisper. All eyes were on us.

“Why would you say such a thing?” I asked.

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*James Slusser's essay “A Coach's Word” first appeared in Teaching Tolerance magazine.*

He rolled his eyes, and scoffed. Then he stepped closer, until I could feel his breath upon my skin.

“You know,” he began loudly, so everyone could hear. “It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and *Steve*.”

The crowd erupted after he delivered his oh-so-clever punch line, and his words and the laughter tore into me with a combination of sadness and furious anger. I looked back at my friends. They looked like I felt—stunned, scared and upset. I wanted to run, but I knew I would never forgive myself. I peered deep into Coach’s eyes, as he laughed at me.

“How can you say such a thing? You’re a teacher—you’re supposed to protect me, not attack me,” I said. He leered at me and announced loudly: “Hey, it’s not my fault that you’re sick!”

The laughter began again. My heart felt like it was going to be ripped from my chest. My forehead throbbed. Coach smiled, like he was some kind of hero. I had had enough. This time, I stepped closer to him. I looked him deep in the eyes.

“You know what? *F— you!*” I roared. My voice echoed through the gym, and the once roaring crowd grew silent.

I stormed out, throwing the locker room doors open without glancing back. I knew I looked so brave, but inside I was falling apart. I felt so ugly, so filthy. I began to tell myself what I used to always say, “Don’t be gay. C’mon, you’re not gay.” I snatched my backpack from the locker, not even bothering to change. I thought Coach was going to come beat me up.

I sprinted to the principal’s office. I had to hurry, because I knew my courage would give out, I knew that fear would find me soon. The principal invited me in, and I took a seat across from her desk. I blurted out the whole ordeal, pouring my heart out to her. She simply sighed, went to the file cabinet and tossed me an “Incident Report” form. I scribbled away, writing so much that I had to continue onto the back side. “*Someone* is going to care,” I thought.

Handing the form back to her, I expected an apology or some words of encouragement. Instead, she simply handed me a hall pass and told me to go to my next class. I went to my next period, and immediately asked for

the bathroom pass. I entered a stall, locked the door and, for the first time in a long, long time, cried so hard that I couldn't breathe.

I hated myself. I hated myself for allowing this man to wound me. I hated myself for being gay. For the rest of my life, I thought, people are going to treat me this way. If a teacher, someone paid to instill tolerance into my life, was going to call me a “faggot” then what chance did I have? For the rest of my life I will be coated in shame. I just wanted to curl up and disappear. I didn't want to be me anymore.

When I got home, my Grandmother asked me why my eyes were red. Out of pure exhaustion, I was honest. She was silent for a long time, and then, without words, picked up the phone and called our family attorney. I would realize years later that this was her way of supporting me—and the person I was going to become. Our attorney—a gay man himself—faxed a letter to my school advising them that they should take action.

Two days later, I was called to the guidance office and led into a small room. Three school officials awaited me. Over the next half hour, I was told in several different versions how “wise” it would be for me to let this “small incident” go. The saddest part? I did.

I was so jaded by the whole incident, by my whole dim experience as a gay teen, that I truly believed I had no right being a “faggot” to begin with. I started to think Coach was right. Maybe it was supposed to be Adam and Eve—not me and Steve.

I left high school at the end of that year and began college prematurely. I couldn't bear another day of seeing Coach in the halls. I couldn't bear the thought of that day. I didn't want to hear the laughter anymore. For a long time, when I looked back at the choice I made to “just let it go,” I was plagued with a sense of anger and frustration for not doing the right thing—for not fighting for the right to be *who I am*.

After years of being ashamed of my sexuality, my heart finally awoke. I stopped being the little boy crying in the bathroom stall—and became a man who happened to be gay. Coach's hateful words set off a domino effect leading to my coming out. I had to look deep down inside and make a decision whether to face a world full of people who would hate me—just like

Coach—or to hate myself the rest of my life for living as a fake. I decided I couldn't be responsible for other people's unjust ignorance, but I could love myself.

After my friends and family embraced my coming out, the self-hate and doubt fled me. Instead of pitying myself, I began to pity people like Coach, who'd never get to know the wonderful gay men and women I've met along the way. I began to pity people who would only be surrounded by copies of themselves.

I did see Coach again, in a grocery store near my high school. He still wore the same old uniform. My first instinct was to confront him, to dare him to call me “faggot” again. But as he passed me, our eyes locked, and all I could see was this sadness inside him. I realized that I didn't need to say anything. I simply shook my head and kept walking. I've never stopped.

# The Healing Heart

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BESSIE JONES

**M**Y NAME IS BESSIE JONES and I am an African-American student at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School. My father was a very abusive man, physically, emotionally, and mentally, to everyone he loved. For that, he will spend the rest of his life in jail. I was young when he left, so I didn't physically go through everything that my mom, my sisters, and my brother did. When he abused them, I guess he thought their wounds would heal but never realized they would have the scars for the rest of their lives. Just witnessing the pain and hurt he caused my family made me feel ashamed of being his child. At times when I was happy I would think about the things he did to my mom and my siblings and feel guilty for having that feeling of happiness.

A broken heart heals itself by sealing off any possible re-entry of love, fearing it will get hurt again. That's what I did. I convinced myself never to let anyone too close for fear I would suffer the consequences, become vulnerable. Amazing how the action of a parent can make a person feel inhuman, deprived of the natural ability to show love, give love, receive love, and most importantly feel loved.

Because of this wall I had around myself, I was surprised to learn that someone saw something special in me deep down. And not just one person, three people. Three teachers nominated me for Summer Search, a summer program that builds leaders by sending low-income youth on experiential summer education programs. When a teacher first came and told me, I looked at her as if she was crazy. I mean, I wasn't at the bottom of the barrel, but I wasn't exactly cream of the crop either. So I wondered why. My curios-

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*Bessie Jones wrote "The Healing Heart" in the summer after her tenth grade year, as a thank-you letter to the organization that supported her Summer Search.*

ity got the best of me so I decided to go to the room and watch the Summer Search tape. I didn't really pay much attention, until it got to this one part. There was a group of people. You could tell they were all from different places, but they all had this connection. This unity. I looked at that and thought how great it would be for someone like me to have that connection and unity with a group of strangers.

When I got to the airport to leave for Washington State, Trevor, the only person I recognized from my Summer Search interview, told me he wasn't going to spend the entire trip with us. When I heard that, I thought, "Of course." I never in my sixteen years of existence had a positive male role model. And here we go again, another man popping in and out of my life; good thing I didn't get too close to him. I looked around at all the people who were going on the trip, and I asked myself what have I just gotten into? I started to judge people and told myself I wasn't going to open up. But luckily, I didn't keep that promise.

Something happened to me out there. For the first time I had moments to myself—moments on the tallest mountain, moments on the deepest sea. When I was out on a kayak by myself, I looked into the sparkling water, untouched by the violence surrounding my life. There were no activities, there was no school or TV or even joking around. Nothing to help me keep that wall up. It was just me and nature. And so for the first time, I had to look at myself.

And I guess just as I was doing that, so were my group members. One day, one of them said to me, when I first saw you, you looked so mean, like you were angry at the world. The rest of the group agreed. That made me think. I thought of all the years I tried so hard not to add to the pain of my family by never expressing all the anger and rage I felt inside. I thought of all the times I tried not to get in the way of my mom and my sisters, not to add to the heavy burden they already carried. But it didn't work. The anger was clearly written all over my outside. And in trying not to express those parts of myself, I was abandoning other parts of me that were gifts from above. How dare I not use them!

Before the trip, I was a prisoner. I lived like there were guards telling

me how to feel, what to do and what I did and didn't deserve. This summer, I found what all inmates wish they had, the key to let them out of their cell. And I realized I'd had it all along, I just had to find it. And once I found that key, it unlocked so many different elements inside of me, elements I shut down thinking I wasn't worthy of them. This summer I found the courage to be happy, I found the courage to connect.

Those twelve strangers became lifelong friends. After Trevor met us in Washington, he couldn't only stay for a few days. He had to complete the trip with us. And Trevor told me that I was one of the main reasons he stayed. Those few words will change my relationships with men for the rest of my life. I will be forever thankful for that.

We are that group of unity I saw on the video. We are all from different places, we all have different stories, but we are all connected by our courage to take advantage of the greatest gift life has given us: love.

# The Case for Race

CANDACE COLEMAN

**A**S A BLACK AMERICAN, I have disliked affirmative action for years. I mean, how could colleges admit blacks, Latinos and American Indians with lower grades and scores, but turn away better-qualified whites and Asians? To me, it seemed like blatant racial discrimination.

Why should colleges and universities lower their standards for minority applicants? It seemed to me that affirmative action allowed exactly the kind of unequal treatment people have been fighting against in the Civil Rights Movement for thirty years.

I thought that affirmative action went against the Constitution, specifically the Fourteenth Amendment and its provisions that persons shall not be discriminated against based on race, sex, creed, or ethnicity. I used to agree with those who think the Constitution is a “color-blind” document and those who think Americans should consider race as an irrelevant issue to ensure equality for all. But is the Constitution really color-blind? Is race really irrelevant in America? I don’t think so.

Most of all, I opposed affirmative action because to a certain extent I believed it diminished my accomplishments as a minority. Being a black American, I didn’t want to face charges of being unqualified, unworthy and unwelcomed. I’m really conscious of people saying behind my back, “She only got into this school because she’s black.”

But for the past few months, I have been doing a lot of reading on affirmative action, and it has changed my opinion. With so much racial inequality still in America, policies like affirmative action level the playing field and actually make our society more just. Remember, it wasn’t too long

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*Candace Coleman wrote “The Case for Race” at age seventeen, as a student at Marymount High School in Los Angeles. Her essay was first published online in WireTap.*



ago when people of color were barred from even applying to colleges, universities and certain jobs because they were minorities.

I read a speech by former President Lyndon Johnson that really influenced my change of opinion. In a speech at Howard University in 1965, President Johnson stated, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.”

Johnson’s assertion had a significant impact on affirmative action policies, and ultimately has changed the minds of many Americans—including mine—on the subject. Now I look at affirmative action as a kind of compensation for past discrimination, including slavery and legal segregation.

Racism today is not as obvious as it was in the past; there aren’t people of color drinking from different water fountains. But when I open my eyes and honestly look around at the world around me, I see that racial inequality still exists. We live in a world with linguistic profiling, where people turn you down for jobs on the phone because they think you’re black or Latino from the way you talk. Things like racial profiling happen daily when the police pull over black men in nice cars because they look “suspicious.” Notice that the mostly white suburban schools have better resources than the mostly black and Latino inner-city schools that lack teachers and safe facilities.

A common misconception that many people have about affirmative action is that it lowers the standards for black, Latino and American Indian students in the college application process.

Take, for example, the case of the University of Michigan Law School being brought to the Supreme Court to determine whether the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment forbids giving one ethnic group or minority special advantages over another. The petitioners/plain-tiffs in the case against the University of Michigan claim that affirmative action lowers admissions standards for minority applicants, which creates hostilities between white and minority students. According to University

of Michigan's own data, white students who were admitted to the University of Michigan had an average GPA lower than that of black students.

Also, over the past ten years, the acceptance rate for white students—meaning the percentage of applicants from a particular ethnic group that are accepted—at the University of Michigan Law School was still higher than the acceptance rate for black or Latino students, and was second only to the rate of acceptance for American Indian students (who still only make up 2 percent of the student population). It's important to step back from the argument to recognize that even with affirmative action policies in place, the University of Michigan is still more than 70 percent white.

In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 209, a ballot initiative that said race cannot be considered as a factor for hiring or admissions in any state institution. After the University of California system enacted the ban against affirmative action, schools like UC Berkeley found that the admittance rates of underrepresented minority students dropped by 14 percent in 1997. The freshman class at UCLA this year has only 281 blacks out of 10,507 incoming students. The decreasing number of minority students detracts from the learning process for all students because it limits the range of perspectives present in class discussions.

When white, black, Asian, Latino, Arab and other students are brought together in a classroom, they can better understand their differences and destroy racist stereotypes that have been so ingrained in our nation's mentality. I met a professor at UCLA who told me affirmative action programs have actually decreased racial hostilities between different groups because of this classroom learning process; when students learn in a more tolerant and diverse environment, everyone benefits from the experience.

I can't imagine being in a class where the discussion is on a particular ethnic group or culture, and there is no one with in-depth knowledge on the subject present. How can a group of all-white students have a serious discussion about slavery, bilingual education, immigration, racism or even affirmative action without recognizing that they are missing some key perspectives in the argument?

Without diversified student bodies, many minority students (including

those at the University of Michigan) are forced to be the “official speakers” for their race. As a black student at a mostly white high school, I’ve helped my classmates understand more about the black experience, but I do get tired of being the “official representative” of my race. Diversity alleviates this pressure on students like me.

Minority students might receive a slight preference when they are admitted into a particular institution, but they have to continue to work hard to earn their school grades just like every other student. Furthermore, race is just one of the many preferences that people can have when applying to college. Many students at my school abhor affirmative action on the one hand, but when it comes to asking one of daddy’s friends on Columbia’s Board of Trustees for a favor—you can bet they start believing in preferences. Schools may give affirmative action to minority students, but regardless of test scores, rich people have always gotten seats in the nation’s most selective colleges and universities by relying on insider preferences.

The *Wall Street Journal* took a look at the practice of “legacy preferences”—a.k.a. white people’s affirmative action—in which the children of alumni are admitted to colleges over better-qualified applicants. Some schools like to admit applicants with alumni ties because they get money for doing so. For example, Al Gore and President George W. Bush have fathers who attended Harvard and Yale, respectively. When applying for college, both Al and George had SAT scores lower than 1300 and bad grades from the prep schools they attended. But the fact that their fathers, who were U.S. Senators, generously gave Harvard and Yale buckets of cash for alumni funds was given a higher priority during the selection process than their academic qualifications as students.

It’s clear to me that everyone gets a share of preferences. So if wealthy people, athletes, legacy applicants and poor people are all given preferences, why can’t underrepresented minorities also get a little consideration?

Getting into college is never solely based on one’s academic merit. Grades and test scores are important, but what a student can bring to a university community can sometimes be even more significant.