

Osman Noueir

1st Place

The Right to Appearance

What do people see when they look at me? Not when one ponders my actions or words, but the quick shooting glances on the sidewalk or on the way to class. These fleeting gestures and the quick mental notes that follow them are much more common than deep thought and consideration, and account for much more of the reason people are quick to judge. Don't we all deserve a right to our own appearance, at the very least? True, the law defends our right to wear whatever we'd like without indecent exposure, or style our hair in any number of ways. But the law can't regulate what people think about how others appear.

Nothing about my being gives away my religious upbringing. My parents grew up in war-torn Lebanon, but I was raised here, in the Midwest. I can't say I am a practicing muslim, but I have a strong connection to the faith. I'm left with a tinge of survivor's guilt, since the people who may judge me because of my ties to Islam may never make that connection at all. Others who are more obviously linked to the faith undoubtedly suffer more than I do, solely because of the way they look. Me? I can just blend in as that tan guy with a pretty big nose. Kirkwood High School is a very homogenous community, if I am being honest. This only makes it easier for certain minorities to stick out constantly. Girls with headdresses automatically are categorized and cast away; they simply stick out as different.

My sister, Hana, attends Nipher for middle school. She does not wear a headaddress. She's tan, but does not have brown skin. Yet only a few weeks ago, one of the girls in her group told her, "I know most muslims are bad, but you're a good one." Such a repulsive and wrongly condescending comment not only showcases the effects of irresponsible parenting, but just gives an idea of what that girl might be thinking about others who appear to be muslim. Only last year, a student in my class who will be submitting an essay to this contest made some rather brazen remarks about me on the bus. According to him, he has the reason to hate me because I am "a terrorist that will probably bomb the school." I have never said a word to that boy in my life, and was quite frankly unfamiliar with who exactly he was before I heard about the incident. I can only imagine what he has to say about all the girls at our school who cover their heads.

Skin color is possibly the easiest way we divide ourselves, and Kirkwood is not an exception. Many students will consciously separate themselves from kids with the "opposite" skin color it seems like. After all, it is the simplest way to create factions—no one can change their skin color, it's always visible, and people have many preconceived notions about every tone between pale as ivory, and dark as ebony. Even hyperlocal slang has developed at our school, denouncing the hallway bordering the cafeteria "Little Africa." This should illustrate to many how first, people physically divide themselves, and eventually, verbally divide themselves. Now look at Kirkwood: the first planned suburb west of the Mississippi. "The other side of the tracks" is not an idiom here. There is literally a set of train tracks that divides most of Kirkwood from Meacham Park, following the historical method of segregation in southern towns. One side is predominantly white, the other is predominantly black, and it's not an accident.

A simple difference such as color lets realtors redline entire counties, Saint Louis being a prime example, with the Delmar divide. A simple difference such as a headwrap allows entire populations to make judgements about an individual before even speaking to them. I am positive that the slight lack of difference I have from Kirkwood's community puts me on a friendlier level to more people. But I still share the same ideas about faith as any respectable muslim in the world. I do not deserve to fly under the radar if people like me face challenges every day, because of the way they look. I'm not asking for legislation. I ask for the simple right of appearing however I please and receiving the same treatment as anyone else regardless of demographic group. I wish this for everyone.

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Catherine Skubiz

The Homeless and Tempest-Tossed

I am not personally affected by human rights abuses. I'm an affluent white girl living here in Kirkwood, preparing to attend an expensive, elite university in a couple of years. I don't have the right to complain about my problems, because while I may discuss how the college admissions process is a scam, both on the money in my pocket and on my time, the next essay may discuss barely being able to pay rent or afford food. For myself to even attempt to claim to have a "human rights issue" would be beyond privileged.

But sitting here in Kirkwood, my blood boils in outrage at the atrocity of the Syrian refugee crisis that I read about in the news, or have even witnessed glimpses of with my own eyes. Many Americans fear allowing these refugees into our country would precipitate more terrorist attacks. I think of this past summer, as an exchange student in Germany, witnessing refugees digging through recycling bins in the middle of Berlin, collecting bottles to exchange for a few cents each, trailing carts behind them filled with the fruits of their searches. I try to imagine these people posing a threat to myself, but I can't. I see only their tired faces, struggling to survive in this new world, and I am sickened that my fellow Americans wish to turn them away.

I am outraged about the millions of Syrians who have been killed, injured, or driven from their homes by their oppressive, violent government, through the roaring waves of the Mediterranean Sea, across the borders of Europe into tents in refugee camps in Hamburg on the side of the Autobahn or in massive boats parked on the river in the middle of a vivacious city

festival. They clustered near the entrance of the boat in the shadow of a ferris wheel, while country music blared through loudspeakers, performed onstage by a band in cowboy hats. The Germans passing by with their ice cream and cotton candy didn't seem to notice them. The refugees aren't allowed to clean their living spaces. Cleaning instills a sense of permanence.

I am outraged by the reluctance of Americans to welcome refugees into the country. The golden door appears to have been shut and the lamp blown out to the homeless and tempest-tossed. The American people, fearful of radical Islamic terrorism, turn away those who fear radical Islamic terrorism even more.

I am outraged that the President of the United States is fighting to officially, and permanently, block Syrian refugees from gaining security and asylum in our country. He seeks to prevent Syrians from entering, although they have never done Americans harm here at home. Refugees, traveling thousands of miles in search of a better life, must face the realization that they may no longer be welcomed into the land of the free and the home of the brave. After treacherous journeys out of their homeland, President Trump denigrates them all as "potential terrorists."

Most citizens here in Kirkwood may not think the refugee crisis in Europe affects them besides expressions of condemnation and remorse while watching the nightly news on a flat-screen TV. But St. Louis has a warm history with refugees; the city welcomed tens of thousands of Bosnian refugees—mostly Muslims—in the early 1990s. These refugees opened businesses and enriched our city with their culture. We, as St. Louisans, know that refugees don't bring crime and violence, no matter their religion.

When I think of the most notable human rights issue of my generation, I think of the desperate refugees fleeing war. I think of the thousands of refugee boys and girls my age, without security and without education. I think of the teens in Turkey and Jordan, Lebanon and Hungary, Greece and Germany, who encounter refugees on the side of their highways and in their neighborhoods. The devastation of the Syrian Civil War is extreme and pervasive. Half of Syria's prewar population—over 11 million people—have had to flee their homes or have been killed. 4.9 million Syrians have fled their country as refugees. A reported 470,000 have been killed. I may not be the victim of human rights abuses. But the millions of refugees are.

Callie Mechelke

2nd Place

Academic Privilege: Our Future, Our Right

I sit in Advanced Placement Language and Composition class, grudgingly composing this essay on a school-provided MacBook Air, and I am not as grateful as I should be. While others like me -- teenage students attempting to thrive in a performance-oriented society -- sit in a classroom with little more than a white board, we at Kirkwood High School curse the mini iPads thrown into our ignorant, unthankful laps. Little do we see how privileged we are. Little do we realize there are students working just as hard in school, but with little return. Little do we understand that the lack of equal opportunity in education is not fantasy, but a sad reality affecting the community in more ways than we can comprehend.

For adolescents striving toward successful futures, the right to receive *an* education is not enough; it should be the right of students to receive a *quality* education. It is ignorant to argue that anyone placed in an underfunded, run-down academic institution has opportunities equivalent to those provided to students striding the halls of Kirkwood High School. Last year, as we welcomed students from the Riverview Gardens School District, this reality surfaced. Riverview itself does not exemplify the largest discrepancy in an educational deficit, but the

transfer of so many students displays some of the difficulties they must endure. Clearly, Kirkwood does not stand as the pinnacle of all St. Louis high schools, but it exemplifies a quality of education that every student has the right to experience. When applying to colleges, it will not matter the personal exertion required to get there, but the quality of credentials. For students attending underprivileged schools, the future promise of college may seem unattainable. Why bother trying if that effort is only to be overshadowed by a lack of resources? Even the most strong-willed desire for a better future, in a society that rewards performance over person, may not be enough if the road leading there is littered with frequent obstacles. The inequality in the Normandy school district is more obvious, as reports show AP classes being taught by “an instructor not certified to teach it” and a “physics teacher [who]... hasn’t taught a lesson in months” (Crouch). How can this compare to those of us at Kirkwood, Webster, Lindbergh, etc. with a plethora of AP courses at our disposal, all taught by capable instructors? I am no more human than the students receiving fewer opportunities; therefore, I am no more entitled to or deserving of an advantage.

Yet, this gap in the quality of education does not just refer to teachings and technological resources, but to the overall environment. For schools in North St. Louis County the location and social climate branded them the most dangerous districts in the area in 2015 (Lloyd & Singer), yet colleges do not take that into consideration. No matter the level of safety and security, students are judged based on performance. We take the environment provided by the Kirkwood School District for granted; it allows us to maintain a comfortable learning atmosphere, something rare in unsafe districts. I feel safe walking into school every morning. I feel safe in the classroom of experienced, talented teachers. I feel safe to express my opinions -- to question, to

argue, to experiment, to laugh, even to cry. Perhaps that assurance, not only in the abilities of my teachers, but of myself, is what allows me to grow as a student. A seed will only take root under certain conditions, just as a human can only grow and better oneself when given the opportunity. But alas, we are all expected to grow simultaneously and reap analogous benefits despite being planted in different soil. Living in one of the most expensive districts in the area, I have been blind to this issue. Not until last year, when busloads of students from Riverview Gardens joined Kirkwood High School, did I realize that not all public schools are so well-off. Nor did I realize that funding provided by the community directly correlates to the quality of education. America has been a beacon of hope and opportunity to many disadvantaged, yet there are students within our very city who are unwillingly destined to remain in their current economic state due to unequal academic opportunities. Social mobility cannot simply be an empty promise; everyone deserves a fair chance to learn, to attend college, and to earn a degree, because that is our right as human beings. We deserve to nourish our minds as a product of our effort and dedication; for just as education upholds our minds, so our minds will uphold the future.

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Taylor Anderson

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3rd Place

Taylor Anderson

You Get Paid Like a Girl

As a junior in high school, I am starting to set goals for my life and follow paths to help create a stronger future. My best friend Jack is doing the same thing, except he is kind of slacking off in school. We will attend the same university, study the same things, graduate with the same gpa, get a job at the same school at the same level, yet I will still only make 80%* of what he makes. Does all my hard work amount to nothing? Where does the 20% go? Jack can send his kids through college, while I am struggling to make up the 20% of money lost just to send my kid to an instate school.

This is a monstrosity. At the public school I attend, equality is a reinforced subject. We have teachers of all races and genders with "Black Lives Matters" proud to have posters hanging up on their walls. We have clubs like the Gay Straight Alliance and the Coalition that promote equality with sexual orientation and genders. The people we look up to are all telling us we aren't so different after all, and discriminating is hating. They try tell us that the color on your skin and the gender you identify with doesn't define your worth in society, but they left out the part where it does define your worth in money.

Our generation is being told that one gender is superior to the other. A father will have to tell his daughter that no matter how hard she works, she may not ever be better than Michael

from across the street. That sayings like “you run like a girl” are acceptable because girls are supposed to be terrible runners, while running like a boy is what everyone aspires to do. That “you shoot like a girl” is acceptable to shout out in a recreational game of basketball because in 2014, 52 NBA players earned more in one year than the whole WNBA combined.** It’s okay to say “you get paid like a girl” because women make only \$0.80 compared to a man’s dollar.

It’s not just about the money either, it’s the meaning. Jack kissed a girl after school yesterday. His friends high-fived him when he got to soccer practice. I kissed a boy after school yesterday. I woke up the next morning with texts from my friends asking when I turned into a whore. The leaders and most powerful men of our country are getting applauded and encouraged with laughter about some of the things they say about women. Us women have to sit back and watch our gender get ridiculed and slut-shamed for the same things men get awarded for. Mothers sit at home, hoping their sweet daughter doesn't ever listen to the man with the yellow hair and mean scowl talk about assaulting women like her.

I think that the first step to achieving something is believing in yourself. How are girls my age supposed to believe in their own self, and think that they have the power to achieve whatever Johnny does when the idea that they are inferior to men is being reinforced their whole life? How are girls my age supposed to believe our future is bright when we are indirectly being told that being feminine is detrimental to our future. Gender equality and the wage gap are such a notable human rights issues in my generation because we are growing and expanding as a society yet the gender of a person has more say on their success and acceptance than their intelligence and skill. It’s 2017. You’d think I would be writing about flying cars or robots as teachers, not about men forever getting the upperhand. I don’t want to run like a girl, shoot like a girl, get

treated like a girl, or get paid like a girl. I want to run like an equal human being. I want to shoot like an equal human being. I want to be treated like an equal human being. I want to be paid like an equal human being.

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