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City of Kirkwood

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Elia Taffa

1<sup>st</sup> Place  
Elia Taffa

Kirkwood High School

### Tackling Taboo Topics

As I walked through the halls of Kirkwood High School for the first time, I was shocked by how “white” the school felt. It was somewhat intimidating - the lofty ceilings, the red and white banners decorating the walls, the courtyard practically glowing green with bermuda grass and lavender. I, an ethnic newcomer to Kirkwood, almost felt like I stepped back in time, as if the hourglass governing this school had somehow got stuck, and Kirkwood High School was bypassed by the push for desegregation. It was simply that the majority of the students seemed ignorant of the racial divides prevalent in many parts of the US. I doubted that many students would fully understand the importance of race in society and my fears were confirmed with the events of Ferguson. Many of my classmates had not known that racial tensions were so high in St. Louis. However, race has and continues to play an important part in everyday life. Racism is a very real thing that many members of Kirkwood tend to ignore.

The median wealth of white households is 13 times higher than the median wealth of black households. Furthermore, The Wall Street Journal states that black defendants receive sentences roughly 20 percent longer than white defendants committing similar crimes. Yet, despite these incongruities, Kirkwoodians are largely ignorant of race and its role in the community.

Kirkwood simply lacks opportunities for the predominantly white population to learn about and

interact with people of varying shades of skin. The high cost of living in Kirkwood does not allow for a diverse population that fosters interracial interaction. The school districts and quaint neighborhoods attract a predominantly white middle class and despite the inclusion of many African American “Riverview kids,” students at Kirkwood High School still exhibit an inability to deal with race. This is most likely the effect of self-segregation. The white students tend to say that they simply happen to get along better with other white students and the same goes for the black students. Just because the school has become more diverse, it doesn’t mean that interracial interaction has increased. Surprisingly, it can actually have an inverse effect due to the increased ability of different demographics to self-segregate. With the clear divide between the “Riverview kids” and the “Kirkwoodians,” self-segregation is only that much easier. Kirkwood students are not reaping the benefits of the increased diversity.

Many people don’t believe me when I tell them of my ethnic heritage. My skin is pale and I look white, mainly because of my father’s European blood. I hear them say that I am “Ethnic On Paper” as if, because my skin is pale, I don’t qualify to be Native American. Yet I am proud of my heritage, I look up to my mother and grandparents. I was born on a reservation, and I identify with the culture. I know that I am Native no matter what others say. Those who observe race from a non-white perspective (including myself) face a dilemma. An insecurity arises because of your skin. You feel a pressure to act the way your race is supposed to act. You feel that acting against those stereotypes is somehow disconnecting you from your own heritage and that you are losing your ethnic identity. This pressure surfaces as a kind of reverse racism. In the hallways of Kirkwood I watch black students who appear lighter getting mocked due to the shade of their skin. For minority students, one of the greatest taboos is “seeming white.” Many minority

students feel a constant push to fail in school simply because succeeding is going against the negative stereotypes their culture has received in academics.

In my opinion, the only way to mend the break between races is to simply talk openly about race.

For too long, race has been a “taboo” topic. Mellody Hobson, one of only two black women chairing publicly traded companies in the US, describes the topic of race as “the conversational equivalent of touching the third rail.” Nobody wants to talk about race, especially parents. They worry that they will somehow distill racism in their “colour-blind” children by pointing out race. However, children are not “colour-blind.” 68 percent of five and six year olds separated a deck of cards depicting people by race. The next highest category, gender, came nowhere near at 16 percent. Children notice and judge their surrounding off of the most obvious features. However, addressing the differences between people can help children come to the correct assumptions about race. For example, in Birgitte Vittrup’s Ph.D. dissertation she set up an experiment comparing the racial attitudes of white children exposed to racially-diverse television shows; white children given a talk about race; and white children who received both. What she discovered was that only the parents who were able to properly address race issues in their conversations managed to improve their child’s racial attitude. Simply talking about race was enough to reduce racism in white children. From the ethnic standpoint, increased talk about race will help replace negative stereotypes surrounding non-white students in the classroom with a more positive ethnic identity and pride which will increase academic persistence and attainment in minority students. Considering the topic “taboo” only hinders the efforts made by others to rewrite racial stereotypes surrounding black and Latino students.

The first steps Kirkwood should take in increasing racial justice should be steps to decrease racial divides and stereotypes. Because of that, I suggest minor changes to the academic system. While suggesting that teachers discuss race openly is highly controversial both because of parent opposition and because of racial attitudes and positions held by teachers in schools, a few simple changes can be made to decrease racial divisions. As early as elementary school, simple team building exercises in racially diverse groups can be utilized to increase racial interaction and decrease racial bias. Such activities would help bridge the gap between the white and black students in a school. Interracial friendships will form and even the parents of these kids will benefit by being exposed to a greater diversity of friends. Seeing a racially diverse and united Kirkwood where there are no race divisions will show to all that look that Kirkwood is a just and equal community.

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Stobbe 1

Daniel Stobbe

2<sup>nd</sup> Place  
Daniel Stobbe

Kirkwood High School

### Schools are the Problem

With the election of Barack Obama, America's first black president, many Americans felt that the race problems in the United States had ended. However, the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, fifty years after the march from Selma to Montgomery, show the brutal reality of how distant Martin Luther King Junior's dream still is. The deaths of these two unarmed young men at the hands of police officers sparked new attention to issues of racial justice. Some people believe that a solution to this problem can be achieved through protest, and, while protest can raise awareness, it is often short-lived. In order to solve the long term problem of racism in society, I believe one must focus efforts on systemic changes, specifically to the school system.

Racism is fostered in schools in many ways, one of which is the system that tracks students almost as they begin school. Starting as early as kindergarten, schools organize students into tracks based on their "academic promise". The higher tracks allow for a more advanced education for some, while setting other students up for lower level classes throughout their years in Kirkwood. Sadly, this is almost always divided by race. Unfortunately, by the time students reach high school, many of the advanced classes do not include an accurate representation of the diversity of the school. For example, my AP United States History class has only one African

American student in it, my AP Language and Composition class has only one African American student in it, and my honors Pre-Calculus class has only two African American students. This does not represent the 18% African American population at the school. Not only does this create academic inequities, but this early socialization of students causes negative race relations because many students don't have experiences with races other than their own. All classes should reflect the diversity of the school in order to allow students to have many different, deep relationships.

Merely creating an equitable classroom does not ensure a racially just environment in the school; students must learn about one another, as well as how to have discussions about race. For this reason, I propose a mandatory race relations class that will teach students how to act and relate to races other than their own. A race relations class should not teach color-blindness, for this is part of the problem, but instead teach students to embrace and celebrate other races. It will teach students to understand each other through historical and contemporary lessons, interwoven with teamwork, to ensure the togetherness that the class is trying to achieve. A race relations class that is mandatory for graduation will begin the progress in schools necessary for racial justice in society.

The final change necessary involves reshaping the internal beliefs around race of the staff members. Stereotypes and racism are ingrained in the minds of people from a very early age without them even knowing it is happening. This socialization comes from religious institutions, media, families, and, sadly, even schools. Districts that want to change race relations must help staff members identify their own biases and see the great potential of their African American students. They need to have high expectations for all students and teach a curriculum that reflects

diversity. To educate staff members, ongoing social justice training must occur. Recently, all Kirkwood School District staff participated in a full day of professional development focused on race. This is a good start, but now administration must fully commit to ongoing training throughout the year. It is only with this training that staff members will be able to play a role in fostering positive race relations.

Schools are the first place that society must look to if it is truly going to create an equal society, because the things taught in school, whether consciously or subconsciously, are the bases that support racism. This is why the most practical steps to improve racial justice are to eliminate the system of tracking in schools, add a mandatory race relations class into the curriculum, and implement ongoing staff training around race. Martin Luther King Jr. knew that it would take a long time to achieve racial justice, but he knew, with the right action, we could get there. He once said, "I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land."

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3<sup>rd</sup> Place  
Annabel Dolan

Dolan 1

Haunted by the Ghosts of Racists Past

Segregation. A word that conjures images of "Whites Only" signs, Rosa Parks refusing to move from her seat in the front of the bus, and Ruby Bridges walking into school for the first time. Racism. These images are more striking: firehoses turned on people; marches through the streets of Washington, D.C.; jails filled to capacity with sullen, prayerful blacks. Every person knows what segregation and racism have looked like historically, and how leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, worked tirelessly to bring an end to these forces in legislation. However, fewer people see the existence of those same evils in today's society. Because there are no longer laws separating blacks from whites, it is assumed that the issue is done, and we should all be able to live together as equals. This is an outdated assumption, and one that leads to further conflict and misunderstanding between peoples of different races. In order to improve racial justice, we must first come to an understanding of the existence of racial divides and their perpetration even within our own community. Only then can "practical steps" be taken to progress towards the dream Dr. King had for this country.

Unfortunately for those trying to initiate improvement, many of the changes that need to occur are mental, not legislative or judicial, and it is near impossible to cause changes in the mentalities of groups of people. The next best thing is changing the communal relations of those people, as much of our perspective is influenced by the places we live. In Kirkwood and Meacham Park, the segregation is apparent in the racial makeup of the communities and the apparent lack of interaction between the two. Kirkwood's population is 91% white, while only 7% of its people are black (Cooperman). These numbers seem shocking in today's seemingly integrated society, however in the context of Missouri's history as a slave state they seem



perfectly logically. Communities have long divided themselves by racial associations, and Kirkwood and Meacham are examples of where those divides are now playing themselves out economically as well as socially. Rarely does one see a black family move into the heart of downtown Kirkwood, and just as rarely is a white person going to walk their dog through Meacham. Why is that? The two groups are unable to see the intentions of the other in their community, and treat "outsiders" with suspicion or confusion. People from Meacham don't come to Kirkwood because of the history of police and communal isolation they have experienced and still feel, while people from Kirkwood feel a sense of fear that keeps them out of Meacham. The link between these two issues is the police. They patrol both areas but satisfy neither in their handling of the people of the other community. Because of the large involvement in both areas, changes in police interactions carry the greatest possibility of changing the racial justice between the two.

One of the most influential theories on effective policing is "Broken Windows", a psychological theory that points to a gap between police and their constituents as the major source of conflict between those two groups. When police no longer identify with the communities they are supposed to protect, they are unable to understand what the driving ideals or events are that cause members of the community to act out or to behave, leading to policing that does not reflect the needs of that specific community (Kelling and Wilson). This conundrum is evident in the vastness of socio-economic differences between Kirkwood and Meacham, and the expectation put upon one police force to promote peace through them both. Instead of trying to create a new police system for Meacham, we must instead change the values and appearance of the current force to reflect the needs of both communities. First, police as individuals and as

units need to undergo racial sensitivity training to properly understand the biases they feel and that are felt towards them, and how to properly handle situations where those biases or prejudices take a role. Second, police should become involved in their communities, and not just in the event of an emergency. If communities feel that they know who their police are, and have interacted with them outside of confrontational situations, members of the community will feel more reason to trust the work the police are doing in *both* communities, not just their own. This shows itself in taking police out of cars and putting them on the streets, having members of the police attend community social functions and making conversation with the people there, and allowing the police themselves and their work to be more visible to the common person. All of these create opportunities for transparent dialogue with police officers and intentional bonds formed between police and the people under their protection. The most crucial element of changes in the police is that they occur not just in Kirkwood, where people already have a good relationship with the police, but also if not more so in Meacham, where community members are more distrustful and less understanding of the police.

The next step involves members of the communities themselves. Discussions are a necessary part of any type of reform, especially one that challenges decades-old social norms and standards. Conversations about race in Kirkwood, specifically surrounding Meacham, were held in the past and continue to be held today, despite the animosity towards the subject caused by Cookie Thornton's shooting of several prominent council members in 2008. These discussions work towards the same goal as this essay; improving racial justice and incorporating citizens of Meacham into Kirkwood. However, a critical part of integration is already occurring, but seems to be largely underrepresented in these discussions: the Kirkwood School District. The school

system is the one place that necessitates interactions between people of both communities, disregarding social stigmas or fears that exist in physically entering the “other” neighborhood. A school day is not separated by economic standings, race, gender, or municipal lines. Students grow up with each other from kindergarten all the way through high school, and the bonds developed during these stages are some of the most critical to development. Unfortunately, schools are not the idyllic place of integration they could be. Because students grow up in a community that is unable to properly breach the racial divide, they unconsciously seat themselves by race, letting their ingrained habits take precedent over good learning environments. Students of color are shown to score lower than the “average” student on tests and when measured by GPA. And the harsh, derogatory, racial slang that is so taboo when younger creeps its way into everyday conversation, classifying people in the hallways as their race, not as another student. These negative situations detract not only from equal opportunities for students to safely learn but also from any progress that is made outside of the school in racial justice. To solve this problem, race must be discussed in school settings. We learn about slavery and the injustices done then; we learn about Jim Crow laws and the legislative injustices they carried; we do not fully learn about the segregation, racism, and injustice that corrupt our society even today. Classes like the new “Africa to America Experience” are a step in the right direction; however unless every single student at Kirkwood High School enrolls in that course, the messages it teaches will only be heard by those who already know them. Kirkwood needs to let all students’ stories, experiences, and opinions on matters such as race be heard, whether that is through the use of our journalism program, assemblies, or specific points in curriculums that allow teachers to delve into the big issues. If this conversation does not occur in adolescence, in the city these

students have known their lives, then it is probable that it will never successfully occur, and a new generation will grow up to unknowingly feed into a segregated society.

The divisions of people is a societal trait that existed in the time of cavemen and will most likely exist when cars begin to fly. It is not always a bad thing; separating criminals from the innocent is a perfectly logical division. However, the division of people by race was created by humans based on false, Darwinistic ideas of what race is. People being treated unfairly because of the color of their skin is a practice that goes against all of the social ideals the United States was built on. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Originally, the word "happiness" was going to say "property". Almost 240 years later, there are still people in our own community who are prevented from buying a home because of the color of their skin. That practice of red-lining was abolished in Kirkwood long ago, but the cities never grew to fully promote justice and equality between blacks and whites. If the communities of Kirkwood and Meacham Park can be brought even slightly closer together through better police initiative and more discussions about race, then the city we call home can truly say that it is working to become a more racially unified and just place.

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KIRKWOOD HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION—2015 ESSAY CONTEST

15

Honorable Mention  
Kendrick Loving

# Allocating Time and Money

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Addressing Injustice through Local Education and  
Support for Economically Disadvantaged Teens

Kendrick Loving  
Kirkwood High School

## Kendrick Loving—Allocating Time and Money

More than sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregation, forms of division and racial inequality persist in Kirkwood and the entire St. Louis area. As the pattern of racial disunion continues, despite diverse attempts to remedy the problem, it becomes clear that the issues are rooted deeply. Through simple measures addressed at education, the heart of democratic society, endemic problems of racial injustice can be addressed efficiently. Kirkwood School District—with its sharp racial divide combined with extensive resources and dedicated staff—is an ideal starting location for reform and investment. Once successful, such a plan can serve as a model for state and national standards.

In a situation where all racial groups had equivalent access to education, racial barriers would quickly disappear because the gap in pay for minority groups stems largely from unequal education, the so-called “achievement gap”. While merely “closing the gap” would not resolve all the complex issues involved, working to do so is the most effective way to reduce racial inequality. For example, high levels of education in Asian-Americans have led to comparable wages to European-Americans on a national scale. While disparities remain, at least in part due to racial or linguistic barriers, high-quality education has largely mitigated the negative effects of the divide for this particular group. The two main culprits in such a “gap” are the resources society considers the most valuable: time and money.

With higher-than-ever costs for college and a full education, providing direct economic aid in full to lower-income people may seem impossibly expensive. Indeed, allocating the necessary funds in an increasingly frugal economy will take much time and effort, and likely address only part of the issue. In spite of these limits, economic aid for smaller expenditures, such as AP and other testing fees, can have significant effects.

## Kendrick Loving—Allocating Time and Money

Time is a more difficult, but generally more important resource to allocate. The elevated time commitments of minority groups to non-scholastic activities, often essential duties as taking care of siblings and raising money through jobs, frequently eat into the time requirements for homework and school. While economic aid would help in reducing the need to care for a family through a job, such a scale of economic aid does not seem practical in the contemporary political climate. Rather, helping students find time through extensive support of afterschool and after-sports programs, library access, and flexible busing schedules can create the time needed to fulfil responsibilities among many students, particularly aiding those most in need. More importantly, especially to those whose situation prevents them from regular use of such programs (e.g. needing to go home to care for a little brother or sister), reducing time obligations would allow many students to work in more advanced courses than before. Through a commitment at all grades and levels of the district to reduce out-of-class workload, Kirkwood schools can begin to advance the needs of all students, particularly helping those groups in greatest need.

The cost to Kirkwood and to American society of letting disparities linger—not merely economic cost, but also social, political, even psychological—outweighs almost any potential cost, especially one as modest as a coordination of resources and reduction of workload. These solutions not only would alleviate the desperate economic and social needs of a growing city, but ultimately advance the democratic ideals of the Kirkwood community as a whole.