

## Third Place Essay by Aixin Wang

We, the people of Rochester, the citizens of the United States of America, are a community, a nation, of immigrants. We boast perhaps the most ethnically diverse population in the world, countless cultures each rich in their own regard. We are the universal melting pot, a place where ethnicities and cultures intermix into a nation united under the principles of freedom and equality.

But have we truly overcome the complicated issues of prejudice, racism, and achieved complete tolerance for differences? No, the truth is that we have not. But we are closer than ever to that goal, and we can achieve it—if we start promoting cooperation and diversity in communities like Rochester.

It is important that we judge everyone by who they really are, no matter their race, religion, or nationality, and accept those around us in exchange for our own acceptance. To treat others as you would like to be treated—that is the bottom line. This is a lesson that I learned through my experience living in two different countries.

Growing up, I realize now that I was always surrounded by people radically different from me in race, religion, and culture. I had moved to an unfamiliar country when I was four. In the beginning, it was hard; I could not communicate with anyone. But I soon found friends, friends that accepted me for who I was. I absorbed different cultures, each of them adding something new and exciting in me. Back, then, however, I didn't know that they were different; I didn't know that I was different. To me, we were all the same—we were people.

As I grew up, I was confronted with the very real issues of prejudice. Because of my Chinese heritage, I am often mistakenly labeled with the Asian stereotype of a studious, quiet girl with overbearing parents. That is not who I am. I had always just accepted my nationality and culture as being a part of me, and I am proud of what I am—and I am Chinese. My culture, however, does not define me.

Coming to the United States and moving to Rochester, I was surprised by the diversity of people. Japan, where I lived for almost six years, is a very homogeneous society, and outsiders are often unwelcome. Rochester was different. My middle school, Twelve Corners Middle School, boasted the flags of all nationalities in school; these flags hung proudly in the atrium, advertising the diversity and greatness of the school. As part of the social studies curriculum, we learned about different religions and their beliefs, something that fascinated me because I had never studied religions before.

I gathered a diverse group of friends. In ESOL at my elementary school, I had friends from all over the world: my friend Dea was a Muslim from Indonesia, Haruka came from Japan, where I once lived.... One of my best friends is a Mormon. She gave me a copy of the Book of Mormon, just to give me an idea of her beliefs. I am not a Mormon, but I respect her religion. It doesn't really matter to me what her religious affiliations are; she is a really caring friend and has a good heart, and that is why she is my best friend.

Differences are beautiful. Think how boring life would be if we were all the same! I delight in meeting new people, in getting to know their lives. I am fascinated by different cultures. I would ask my Jewish friends about the meaning of their various holidays and their reasons for fasting. Attending a friend's Bat Mitzvah, I sang along after her reading of the Torah and got a chance to appreciate the traditions of Judaism. Although I am not a Christian, either, I love Christmastime and the general feeling of happiness the holiday season brings.

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In bridging our differences, I have found that it is important to develop a profound understanding and appreciation of other cultures. Each culture has some special aspect that makes it truly unique and irreplaceable, and if only we could understand a culture, we would appreciate the beauty that lies in its difference. As communication is the first step toward understanding, I would first to broaden the language studies programs at our schools to offer more language choices—not only French and Spanish, but also Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Russian, Arabic.... I am fortunate to speak four languages and am grateful that I am able to communicate with different kinds of people.

Foreign language classes should also place more emphasis on culture. Teaching assistants are vastly helpful, providing a personal link to a faceless culture and possessing extensive knowledge of their culture—they live it! In my Spanish class last year, teaching assistants from Latin American countries such as Peru and Mexico presented their traditions. Our whole class enjoyed it when Carla, who was from Lima, Peru, taught us a popular song in Spanish and we sang the words together. It was the same as any pop song in English, but it made me feel a personal connection to her culture.

I would also encourage more foreign exchange programs. Making personal connections with real people is what ultimately brings us closer to a culture. Spending time abroad gives us a chance not only to learn but also to understand and appreciate the beauty that lies in differences.

Before the election this year, our school had a day where the students and faculty all wore our political colors. Most students showed up to school proudly decked out in blue, red, and green. The colors clearly showed our differing political affiliation—and yet not one person was made fun of for his or her beliefs, even in our mostly Democrat-dominated school.

It should be no different for differences in ethnicity, religion, lifestyle choice, economic class, or anything else. We as a community should strive to create a society where every single one of us can proudly say that we are different, that we are unique, without fear of rejection, and be respected by others.

Today, the world faces many problems. In addition to pressing environmental issues such as global warming and lack of reliable energy sources, we are also warring with each other. We are all on the same boat, and unless we cooperate, we will all sink. That is why, starting in our uniquely diverse Rochester community, we need to go beyond our differences. We must step out of our comfortable boundaries and reach out to those around us. Only then will we truly embrace the foundations of our great country and create a harmonious society promoting peace, understanding, and universal acceptance. Together, we can achieve.