

Honorable Mention Essay by Carly Maldonado

“It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”

Maya Angelou

Since my birth, my parents have instilled in me the lesson that Maya Angelou pleads parents to teach their children - diversity is beauty and diversity is strength. My family itself is very diverse, my father is Puerto Rican and my mother is white, of European descent. Both of my parents grew up in areas that lacked diversity: my mother was born in a predominantly white suburb of Rochester while my father grew up in a neighborhood in the Bronx that was almost entirely black and Hispanic. When my mother and father married, their families and friends embraced each other. Therefore, since my birth I have been surrounded by people from all different cultures and lifestyles. These experiences have shown me and my siblings the beauty that diversity encompasses.

Unfortunately, not all young people are exposed to the beauty of diversity in their homes. Young people who are not exposed to diversity at home must learn about its power from other sources. These sources include school and literature. As an avid reader, I have come to realize that books are one of the most effective means of promoting diversity. For example, I recently read When I Was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago. This memoir details Ms. Santiago's childhood, from her birth in Puerto Rico until she moved to New York as a teenager. Ms. Santiago's account of her life in Puerto Rico incorporates many traditions of the region. Each chapter begins with a traditional Puerto Rican saying. My favorite was “lo que no mata engorda” which means “what doesn't kill you makes you fat.” This is a common dinnertime exclamation in my home because my sister and brother are picky eaters!

Racism, discrimination, and prejudice can stem from a lack of understanding. Authors, like Esmeralda Santiago, build bridges between the lives of the characters and the life of the reader. These bridges allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and lifestyle of a certain character. This understanding can annihilate prejudices that the reader has formed throughout his or her life. Therefore, it is vital that schools, public libraries, and other community organizations make literary material promoting diversity available.

I attend school in the Webster School District where, two years ago, a summer reading program was established. This past summer the district published a summer reading list that was more than two-hundred pages long and each student in the district was required to read two books from the list and complete a report on the books of their choice. I was extremely pleased that the book list was comprised of a myriad of books that promoted diversity and acceptance of all people. The summer reading list contains books, including James McBride's The Color of Water, which feature bi-racial and multi-cultural characters. The summer reading list does not only include books that promote

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acceptance of people of different races and cultures, though. Books, such as Alex Sanchez's Rainbow Boys, feature beloved characters that are homosexual. It was my understanding that the inclusion of books that feature characters that are homosexual was an attempt to teach students that *all* people, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are equal and deserve to be treated respectfully. I was proud to be a part of a school district that recognized the necessity of this lesson.

Therefore, I was shocked and disappointed when I read in August 24th's Democrat and Chronicle that Rainbow Boys was removed from the summer reading list after the district received complaints from parents. I have read Rainbow Boys and believe that it articulately conveys the fundamental message that homosexual high school students face choices and difficulties that are similar to those faced by heterosexual high school students. I believe that by highlighting these similarities Alex Sanchez creates a common ground for homosexual and heterosexual teens to stand on. The book also contains messages that assure homosexual teens that they, in the words of Alex Sanchez, "are special and worth being cared about, loved, and accepted just as [they] are."

I have heard students use the word "gay" as though it were synonymous with the word "bad" or "stupid." Few stop to think about what the word really means and how its frequent misuse is offensive to many homosexual and heterosexual people. I believe that books like Rainbow Boys should be read by *all* high school students because they promote acceptance and provide an opportunity to discuss diversity. The removal of Rainbow Boys from the summer reading list deprives students of powerful messages that are necessary for sculpting them into sensitive and successful adults. While the removal of Rainbow Boys may seem minor it is as detrimental to society as denying people who are homosexual the right to marry, adopt children, or be ordained as religious leaders.

Alex Sanchez wrote, in an email to the Democrat and Chronicle, "Fortunately, we live in a country where freedom of speech and thought are cherished values. Every attempt to censor a book is an attack on our constitutional freedoms." I view the removal of Rainbow Boys as censorship, which I vehemently oppose. Censorship of literature that promotes diversity and acceptance destroys the bridges that have been built. The removal of Rainbow Boys and the controversy that has ensued could now be used to initiate an open dialogue about the importance of promoting diversity. Today's teens are tomorrow's leaders and parents who teach their children that only certain people deserve certain rights are endangering our future.

My parents have taught me that not only am I to be accepting; I am also to speak out against intolerance. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "Every burned book enlightens the world; every suppressed or expunged word reverberates through the earth from side to side." I hope that by speaking out against censorship of literature that promotes diversity I am enlightening the community and encouraging members of the community to read books that promote diversity, acceptance, and tolerance. If every member of the community reads such a book, bridges will be built throughout Rochester and eventually, the World. And of these bridges, Reverend Rice would be proud.