

First Place Essay by Casey Simzer

He's hungry but he doesn't complain because he's always hungry. We offer to let him in and make him something to eat and to escape from the cold. As he sits quietly at the table holding his stomach with his thin arms snugly wrapped around himself. I realize his tattered t-shirt is cut for the fit of a girl. I couldn't help imagine how funny the looks on my friend's faces would be to see his shirt because it's a girls, they would die. The griddle scorches and sizzles as the bread hits its hot surface. Everyone is talking and laughing except for him. He sits with his head down and patiently waits. My eyes meet his so I flash him a smile and hand him a glass of milk. He thanked me and looked back down hiding his eyes under his hat and out of my view.

"My parents took my cell phone away again!" I jumped as the chalky green locker behind me vibrated and shook. I was standing in the chaotic hallway of our high school retracing the weekend that had just past while someone slammed their locker. I looked down the narrow hall. A thin girl with a dark complexion was standing at the locker next to me. She was hunched over as she ranted on about how unfair her parents are only stopping to wave her manicured nails in the air as her friend fixed her make up in the mirror. It made me nauseous. For much of my life I have spent my weeks moving between households, towns, and friends. I have always known that in many ways I am always going to be different from much of the kids that go to my school. I don't have all the things they do and I'm perfectly happy because I'm grateful for what I have earned. Every weekend I go from my pleasant, quiet suburban neighborhood with my mom to the rundown track my father lives in. I live between poverty and wealth and in our community I feel people make judgments everyday based on money and whether we choose to acknowledge it or not there is little understanding between our economic classes.

I have always noticed the difference between the life I lead at my mothers and fathers homes. Moving between the two I feel people are unaware of how life really is even in the house next door. Many times people will look and judge others without ever thinking about who that person is or where they may come from. Many times people assume everything is by choice. In my mothers home town many kids have had everything handed to them so their biggest complaint is having their cell phone taken away from them, failing a class, or being punished by their parents. While in other places punishment is jail time or being pushed out onto the streets for back talking an adult. I have seen friends hungry just because they don't have enough money to go grocery shopping and then afterwards gone to another friend's house and had to listen as they fought with their parents because they bought the wrong brand of ice cream. While friends of mine complain that their car isn't the right color. I can't help but think about other friends who gladly walk for hours on end or take the bus. Both sides hate one another for what they do or don't have and it bothers me that so many people could say they feel bad or understand what others go through but still complain about some of the more simple things in life.

I have always tried to judge people based on personality without making any conclusions because I have grown up stuck between two worlds only twenty minutes apart. When a person says something for the most part I try to look at it from their

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perspective and what reason they have for saying it. Many times I find myself interpreting for other people. I find myself explaining that the other person grew up a certain way and that's all they have ever known so they think the way that do. Sometimes I wish I didn't have to translate and people understood for themselves.

At my moms the house is usually empty except for me and my little sister. My mom is a single parent and has to work seventy hours a week and go to school to keep us in the neighborhood we live in. She's not home much. So when I'm at my mom's I go out of my way to help out around the house. It's hard constantly explaining to all your friends that you don't have everything they take for granted. I get tired of explaining to people why I don't have a ride or why I couldn't just ask someone; because there's no one home to ask. When your mom works seventy hours a week you find yourself walking a lot of places. I don't mind living the way I do. When my mom finally has a Friday night off from working her evening job as a waitress we play loud music, go out to eat, make sundaes, and all watch movies. We try to do everything average everyday families do but in our "run down" house. I don't usually have friends over because my lifestyle is much different from what their used to so it's hard to bridge the gap. For them my moms house is one of the most run down houses they have ever been in while compared to my dads it's nice and I constantly feel guilty. I feel badly because my mother tries so hard to bridge that gap between us and the people living around us. She tries to give us everything they have or at least help us experience life as close to "normal" as possible while my father doesn't even attempt.

Many times in the past I have even been misunderstood my own family and friends. My father thinks that because of the town I live in I want material things. Its one of the most painful things trying to explain to your own father that you do not want the fifty dollars he's been saving for you for months. I have even had friends that have told me "I don't know how you do things were you come from but out here..." almost as an insult to the town my mom lives in as if the fact that I live at my moms even sometimes makes me self centered.

At my fathers there are seven of us girls, my father, their step mom, and their uncle who sleeps out on the couch. There is only one bathroom that we all share in our one story ranch home. I don't have my own room so I pretty much share a bed with which ever sister I fall asleep with that night. You can expect to find a sink full of dirty dishes a floor that's been upswept and clutter most places. All of this never even comes across to me as different or weird until the thought crosses my mind of having a friend from my mother's house over. I think about the house they live in and their reaction to me explaining were we are going to sleep or what we are going to do. So to make things easier I would never invite anyone over. Recently I brought my closest friend out to my father's house for the first time. I had never before brought a friend of mine to his house because wouldn't want to make any of my friends uncomfortable. When inviting my friend over for the weekend these things never crossed my mind like they used to growing up. While she was over I could tell many situations made her uncomfortable but it didn't bother me because I realized that she needed to see the other half of my life. The

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life I lead at my fathers is as much a part of the person I am as the lifestyle of my mothers.

I think many of the reasons people do not understand each other is because they have never experienced it for themselves. I believe that if we brought these groups of people into one another's environment they would have a better understanding of the lives they lead. Back at school on Monday we were both standing in line waiting to get something to eat and she breaks the short silence by stating that she had so much fun and loved my entire family. Quickly she looked around and then made a disgusted face and then slowly announced that "life is so much different out there then it is here and I'm just realizing that". Just as she was finishing someone behind us in line began to complain about their ipod and how they wanted a new one so they have been trying to break it. We turned around and looked back at each other with smiles on our faces I knew at that moment she was thinking about the friend of mine who stayed with us that weekend, the shirt he was wearing, and the eight sandwiches he had eaten. She had not even finished explaining herself and someone had proven her thought for her just one statement. I was shocked. I'm not used to people fully understanding what I have been trying to get across for years. She finally understood within one weekend what I have been preaching our entire friendship. I think that if she can realize what I have been trying to express for years in a few days that others could understand also.

I believe the best way to get the message across that we are all fortunate for what we have and that people are all the same the only difference is our back rounds is by setting up a work shop every year were kids from opposite sides of the track from different schools trade places. Kids from wealthier schools could be placed in schools on a tighter budget. Everything could be based around making friends from different communities and creating awareness. Before the day of the workshop a ceremony for each grade level could be held explaining the nature of the program. The morning of the workshop would start with the kids being bussed to school like every average school day. From there the kids will be sent to their homerooms. A pre-selected amount of kids, most likely based on home rooms, from each grade will be sent to another school. The same amount of kids will be taking the place of the students leaving. Taking on the classes that students taking and being introduced to that kids friends. The entire school will not be bussed over at once. To make this really work their must still be kids from that grade and that school going to their regular classes. To further encourage the kids to fully participate school credits for community service could be awarded. If kids get a taste of what its like to live a day in another kids shoes with different friends, lifestyles, social class, and even race they could be brought to understand that everyone is the same we are just packaged differently.

I believe that placing people in others environment for a day could help make people more understanding. With an experience like switching schools peoples eyes could be opened to what they did not realize was happening so close to them. People would better see the similarities between themselves and others who may have once been bridged by their differences. This could help people think outside the box, outside their

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social clique, and think about people they may have never spoken to before. This could help bring together people or even just help to inform people that our economic value is not what defines us we ourselves do.