

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

-Martin Luther King Jr.

On a spring day in 1999, I ate lunch with two friends in the cafeteria of my high school. We were excited to have reached a major milestone in our youthful existence—senior year. While conversing about our hopes of matriculating to college, one of my classmates shared with us a disappointment that her boyfriend had suffered. She stated, "My boyfriend did not get into Cornell because some black girl took his spot." I stared at her. With wide eyes I wondered if I had suddenly become deaf, confused or simply unable to interpret the English language. I asked her to repeat her declaration. She said with confidence the same statement, and this time another classmate agreed with her. I felt the air in my lungs escape before I had the chance to take a recovery breath. Now I was facing two of my classmates whom I had claimed as friends for four years as they explained to me how a nameless black student robbed her white counterpart of his opportunity for higher education.

Surprisingly I managed to leave the cafeteria in my stunned state. My goal of returning to class on time was futile because I was emotionally consumed with the event that had just transpired. By the time I made it to my locker, I had burst into tears. A few students in the hallway tried to assuage my mental turmoil, but I could not control my breakdown. I explained to the uninformed crowd that two of my classmates told me that black people take opportunities from deserving whites. As I relayed the story, I realized that my lunch comrades were not alone in their stance. In fact, they were not likely to be the minority in thoughts about race and opportunity in this country, but instead they were more likely representing the masses. I wished I had the courage to say how I felt when I heard the ignorance the first time. I did not have the ability to respond when I heard it the second time. While wiping the tears, I decided that I would tell my entire school that racism is stifling our growth as a community.

One month later, long after the harsh words had penetrated my ears, I addressed my lunch room silence by giving a speech to 550 students who had gathered in our school's chapel. I informed the students that someone thought her boyfriend was deprived of an opportunity to enroll into one of our nation's universities because a black student had enrolled in his place. Not sharing the name of the student who revealed this information, I illustrated the folly of this interpretation. If a student is not admitted to a university, he should not assume that his position in the class was replaced by another person. My classmate was implying that the black girl was not qualified for Cornell University and so she "stole" the chance for a more qualified candidate to matriculate. While the black student's credentials remained hidden in a file at the university's admissions office, my classmate vilified this woman based on the color of her skin. By the end of my oration, I had implored the student body to challenge its prejudices and to embrace diversity.

My loss of words in the cafeteria occurred because I was one of ten black students in my high school class. I had matured with classmates whom I thought respected me for my integrity. However, I painfully came to the conclusion that they could not look past my race. Integration at my high school had happened at least thirty years prior to my arrival, and yet I was still fighting the same battles that the brave black pioneers most

Janice Lindsay Reed
Case School of Medicine
Class of 2008

Martin Luther King Jr. Essay Contest

likely faced. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned a society in which his four children would be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. It took one month for me to eloquently craft my words to encourage a microcosm of society—my high school—to abandon discrimination. It was a matter on which I could no longer remain silent.