

## **First Prize: Chet Ellis, Staples Senior**

### **The Sound of Silence**

You have two choices being a black person in Westport, Connecticut. You either do your best to be invisible, or you embrace the fact that in every situation you will be the very noticeable splash of color.

By the seventh grade, I decided to hide in plain sight. I covered myself in rags from J. Crew and Vineyard Vines as camouflage, trying to show the people around me that I belonged. My disguise was perfect — or at least I thought it was until one microaggression after another reminded me how feeble my disguise really was.

"I'm blacker than you," was a revelation white students often stumbled upon after hearing that I had not yet listened to the new Lil Wayne album. While my pigment acted as a tangible disqualifier to their claims, they would continue on to describe me as "the whitest black person they know." What they were really saying was that I didn't fit the stereotypes they grew up on. Knowing the underlying sentiment behind their words, I could have confronted them. Instead, time and time again I stood there, silent.

Anyone who knows me knows I love to argue. I would fervently defend my position on why the snickerdoodles in the cafeteria were better than the sugar cookies, but when asked for my take on affirmative action I would just mumble and change the subject.

I thought my silence was saving me, but I eventually came to realize that it only made me more of a magnet for microaggressions. My middle school math class could've been confused for a 1950's comedy club, with everyone vying to tell the most tasteless, insensitive racial joke. I'd say the winner was one of my tablemates who came running into class one day grinning and out of breath. "I got a good one. How long does it take for a black woman to poop?" I held my breath, "Nine months!" He exclaimed, jittery from what he had thought was comedic gold. I simply flashed my teeth in his direction and tugged up on the corners of my mouth to form a plastic smirk. He had offended me to my core, and yet there I was feeling compelled to smile so as not to offend him.

I see now that every microaggression I let slide in middle school opened the gates for more aggressive aggressions in high school. On the freshman soccer team, always under the guise of "jokes," at least monthly something would sting. I remember one game my teammates used to play, "get that minority," where they would chase and tackle me or the other brown kid.

That it was un-politically correct was precisely their point. In their minds they weren't racists, they were pretending to be racists. But to me, it was so surreal and wildly outdated, I could only imagine passersby thinking we were all performing some sort of grotesque historical reenactment. Of course, at the end of every practice, I'd just smile and say see you tomorrow.

Then, when my team took our yearbook photo, a teammate suggested I move to the center. At the time I didn't get the joke, but apparently, it would be funny if the one black person was in the dead center of the photo. Persuaded by my teammates, I kneeled down and smiled. I hadn't thought again about the picture until one of my friends came to me, visibly exhausted from laughter, and showed me an edit of the photo on his phone. One of our classmates had photoshopped Klan hoods on every one of my white teammates' heads and kept me smiling away in the dead center. For a long moment, I forgot that I knew how to breathe. I looked at my friend, who was looking back at me to see if I'd continue to be a good sport. It took me a moment, but once again, I pulled out the old plastic smirk.

But by the time I got home, I knew that I'd had enough. I started researching why it was so hard for me to speak up and discovered a study on the interaction of "token" women in the workplace. In the 1977 research paper entitled "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life," author and Harvard Business School professor, Rosabeth Kanter, studied the lone women in otherwise all-male workplaces, but her research also seemed to apply to me. Kanter wrote, "If tokens collude, they make themselves psychological hostages of the majority group. For token women, the price of being one of the boys is a willingness to turn, occasionally, against the girls. The token woman, in other words, is required to sell out her own kind."

These words rang in my head. "Had I sold out my own race in an effort to fit in?" By not speaking out at the microaggressions early and often, was it my fault that I experienced an escalation of egregious racial incidents? If my teammates had not known that I would stay silent and instead defend myself and my race, perhaps they would never have dared flaunt a "joke."

So I've come to realize that racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas are like weeds that need to be yanked out at their inception. As soon as you see them poke through the ground, it is our responsibility to pull up each and every one from the root. Left unaddressed, these toxic ideas and sentiments blossom into vast fields of hate and bigotry. I don't blame myself for being racially targeted. However, I do blame myself for not speaking out. If I could have found the strength to stand up back in middle school, who knows who would have stood up with me?