

### Third Prize: Daniel Boccardo, Staples Senior

## CACTUS IN A RAINFOREST

"Where are you from?" For me, that question is complicated. My parents were born and raised in Venezuela; I was born in New York. When asked, I naturally respond with, "I'm from New York. To which the person asking the question looks at my brown face and asks, "But, where are you really from?" I then respond, " Venezuela. " This usually elicits a strong reaction from family members who actually did live in Venezuela. I claim I'm not truly Venezuelan and call me what they think I am, a gringo. So if I'm being completely honest, I'm not sure where I'm from.

I've lived my whole life not really caring where I'm from, figuring I'm me and who cares where I was born? But today I realize my heritage matters more to society than I thought; we live in an "us vs. them" world. Clearly, I get asked where I'm from so the questioner can figure out whether I'm part of their "us" or their 'them." This is particularly divisive when the leader of the free world publicly espouses that ('us" and "them" need to be separated by a wall because 'them" are raping and murdering 'us.')

The challenges associated with being the child of Venezuelan parents living in NY began early. I attended public school while being raised by parents who knew little English. My mother taught me the only language she knew at the time, Spanish. Not knowing English led to many difficulties in school. Teachers didn't know what to do with me because I was so quiet and didn't read or speak like the other kids. This led to my parents being called in frequently to meetings which they couldn't really understand because they only knew a little English. In one of these meetings, my Kindergarten teacher asked about my parents' heritage. When learning that they were Venezuelan and spoke Spanish, she proceeded to ask what dialect they spoke. This suggested that my own teacher knew nothing about Spanish or how to communicate with me, as Spanish doesn't have dialects. Spanish is Spanish, it doesn't matter where you go.

From there, I was sent to every special-ed, reading and ESOL class imaginable. I was evaluated by various professionals; Somehow, my public school diagnosed me as having ADHD with mild Autism. They obviously got their "diagnosis" wrong because I had neither of those things; I just didn't speak English. Not knowing English was treated like a disease needing to be cured. I was beaten over the head with English and forced to redo Kindergarten.

As a high achieving senior in high school, I'm one year older than most of my classmates and I obviously don't face the same obstacles I faced as a young boy. But there are some things that I have to contend with which others don't. Being asked questions like, "Do you people celebrate Thanksgiving?" when I've lived in the United States my whole life really affects me. It's not a sharp pain, but a reminder of how I don't seem to belong. There's

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a disconnect between me, my community and the broader society. It sometimes feels as though I'm a cactus grown in a rainforest where cactus don't belong.

I felt this most deeply just recently when I was in the throes of applying to college. I was handed an article by my guidance counselor about how to fill out the FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student [Financial] Aid) documents when your parents are illegal aliens. A person in a position of influence and authority in my high school just assumed my parents were illegal immigrants, criminals. The new Al Qaeda to many Americans. I'm not illegal, and neither are my parents, and today, we speak Spanish and English equally well.

Unfortunately, I am not alone in my struggles. There are countless Hispanics with parents who were born and raised in different countries who sometimes feel as though they are the enemy and have no place in America. These feelings stem from microaggressions perpetrated by people who didn't necessarily have terrible intentions. I believe that most people have their heart in the right place and their messages come from a place of misunderstanding rather than intentional hate.

In our town, there are many things we can do to combat this misunderstanding, starting with parenting. Children aren't born with a particular view of other people and have no sense of what makes us different. Learning tolerance, empathy, and love for all people is crucial. Parents also need to instill a sense of community, reminding children that no matter their skin color or looks, we are all just people who want to make the best of ourselves and our community.

Educators can also help by teaching children to look for similarities and rather than differences. Tear down walls, rather than try to bully Mexico into paying for one. Look at people as not black, white or brown but instead as part of "us." They need to be particularly attentive to my first generation brothers and sisters and my ESOL cousins. For they are as much a part of "us" as Westporters are to each other.

The words of government officials in office may not change, but the voices of our new generation can. Young and progressive voices like that of State Senator Will Haskell need to demonstrate that there is a place in America for everybody. Their words, actions & policies, messages of inclusion, fairness and empathy could be seen and heard through all the news media of today. This will, over time, help to build a stronger sense of belonging in Westport where we can look beyond skin color, accents and clothing and merely see each other as fellow Westporters - members of a community that hopefully can be an example of what America is at its best.