

No Longer 91 Percent

I grew up in a family whose ancestry was flanked by dragons: the crimson Welsh ddraig goch and the scaly Chinese long. This combination of Anglo-Saxon coal miner and Chinese villager blood has shaped me as a person, presenting challenges but also fostering my more open-minded identity. This melding of lamb stew and potstickers is not merely a personal issue, but one that will affect our country and community as the minority population grows in our country and town. Westport will have to challenge itself to become comfortable with other ethnicities and in doing so, will reap the benefits of a broader cultural perspective.

The starting point for a spectrum of diversity is a relatively white canvas. According to the 2010 census, Westport's population is 91% white, with America as a whole being 72% white. Although these statistics are rapidly changing, our degree of homogeneity provides a palpable obstacle towards accepting a multiracial America. The issue plagues us on a day to day basis, expressed in hate crimes and subtler bigotry. This past November, white students at San Jose State University tormented a black freshman, calling him names and putting a bicycle chain around his neck. This February, as fans gathered to watch the quintessentially American Superbowl, there was backlash towards a Coca Cola commercial playing "America the Beautiful" in different languages, with comments labeling the ad as "un-patriotic." As more cultures share our country, we must learn to redefine the image of a "typical" American, but this shift can spark resistance. On a town level, we may not grapple with hate crimes, but more understated intolerance is present, clear when a student makes a joke about middle-eastern terrorists or makes fun of Asian slanted eyes. At Staples High School, students from Bridgeport commute to Westport schools through the Open Choice Program. In the cafeteria, students self-

segregate, by town and by race. This addiction to the status quo, with students staying with familiar peers, mirrors Westport and America as a whole. Many of us resist opening up to others of a different background.

But overcoming our fear of diversity will make us stronger as a nation and more compassionate as people. Historically, immigrant groups in the United States have been a source of progress and innovation, with Chinese laying railroad ties and Welsh digging anthracite coal in the perpetual nighttime of the mines. This legacy can continue, with different ethnicities allowing us to access new ideas, tap into new markets, and improve international relations. Beyond economic strength, a mix of ethnicities will make us more tolerant and empathetic towards others. Rather than recoiling from a gay couple or crossing to the other side of a street from a black man in a hoodie, we can learn to see these individuals as people rather than a blanketed “other.” That couple reminds us of a classmate we had in English, that man is just a friend from a cafeteria table; in short, they are people with their own human strengths and flaws. For Westport specifically, a more diverse population will allow us to reconnect with the areas around us. The few miles between here and Bridgeport translate to huge economic and ethnic gaps. But if we can learn a lesson in tolerance and empathy, we can stop being an entity of 91%, instead working to find common ground with towns around us.

I personally have reaped some of the benefits of multiculturalism, not necessarily within my community but within my family. As a child, I watched people in a Chinatown restaurant eating jellyfish and chicken feet and peered at stooped old women brewing herbal concoctions in the depths of Asian pharmacies. I absorbed these experiences, accepting them as a cultural norm. It was more than a matter of politeness; I could also identify with these people, tapping into my

own Asian roots and knowing that questionable seafood and mysterious teas were part of my own identity, something to be respected rather than scorned. In the classroom I have also received doses of culture, even through something as passive as reading Frederick Douglass's autobiography or the firsthand accounts of Aztecs being conquered by European Conquistadors. But despite my exposure to my own Asian culture and an indirect link through literature, I too would benefit from increased multiculturalism in Westport. I could better understand different cultural experiences and broaden my acceptance and openness, dispelling preconceived stereotypes and replacing each cardboard archetype with an array of unique individuals. On a practical level, diversity will prepare me to thrive, function, and socialize within the multicultural college, workplace, or home of my future. It will give me a more complete perspective through which to analyze political issues like immigration or affirmative action and global issues like nuclear talks with Iran or a flood in Thailand. It will help me connect to different kinds of art, literature, food, and perspectives of the world, as well as the more mixed towns and demographics around me. It will ultimately build my identity; I am more than a Westporter, or even a Chinese-European: I am a citizen of the world.

As the country moves towards diversity, a mosaic of races and ethnicities, a coded map filled with dots of different colors, we will face challenges that are already looming. On a local scale, it may be a rude comment, a cold shoulder in the hallway to a student whose race or background is unknown. On a national scale, it may be uproar over a commercial or resistance to a new president. However, these obstacles are not insurmountable. America has for hundreds of years successfully met the challenge. A diverse population will yield greater human empathy and understanding and a richer culture. Once we can stop categorizing individuals by race and by accepting them all as human, we can bond as a town, a country, and an international community.