

hip deep

Opinion, Essays, and Vision
from American Teenagers

EDITED BY ABE LOUISE YOUNG

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NEXT GENERATION PRESS

August

DELLA JENKINS

THE SUMMER MY DAD LEFT it was hot as hell and I picked cherry tomatoes with him in our garden, seeds running down my face. The tomatoes were practically bursting already from the heat and if you touched them a little too hard they would explode before you could even get them to your mouth. My mom spent a lot of time at the pond, she could suntan for hours, but my dad just paced. He always loved the first frost and could predict it the night before from the smell. Autumn fit my dad well. His silvery hair and icy blue eyes seemed to wait all year long for the cold to come. I sometimes think he went crazy that summer from the humidity and all, but that's probably ridiculous, blaming my parent's downfall on the weather.

Anyway, by the time it did start to get cold at night he was gone. The peepers were going insane that night when I woke up to hear the car starting. I remember I sat up halfway in bed and watched the lights disappear down our driveway. I couldn't have been sure it was the end but I could feel it pulling at me and when the car turned out of sight further down the road something seemed to snap in me. I was up and I was running and I didn't stop until the gravel hurt my feet too much to keep going. My mom was standing at the door when I came back but she didn't talk to me and I was glad because I don't think I could have stood it if she had tried to tell me it was okay. She didn't look okay and I hate it when she lies.

The rest of the night I just lay in bed and I listened hard to the darkness. I was waiting to hear an engine and the door closing behind him but I guess I must have eventually fallen asleep. After a month or so he called

Della Jenkins lives in rural Massachusetts and is a junior in high school. She wrote "August" in response to an assignment in English class.

the house when he knew Mom would be at work and he asked me if he could come see me and I didn't know what to say, so I said yes. Then he began coming to the house every two weeks but he was gone to me. He was gone to me for more than three years. I was blinded by anger that he did not care enough to see me every day, or maybe more that eating tomatoes with me was not enough to hold him here.

I have to say I pushed him away, the whole time complaining that he had no time for me. I was lost like this for so long that when I finally looked up into his eyes again he looked horribly old and I thought I must have missed something. I got this terrified feeling that I had killed him with all my blame. His vision was going very fast they said, possibly blind in the next year. None of the doctors could quite figure out what was wrong with the retina but I knew. I knew I had thrown his blame in his face, put frost in his eyes. I knew every time that I refused to look at him when he told me he loved me that I had frozen him a bit more and taken a moment of sight away from him. And suddenly all I wanted was to show him the violent red and green of a garden in August, tell him that I had felt the heat too and that it couldn't have been his fault.

Immigration Kids

DANIEL CACHO

1981

A baby boy was born in tiny Caribbean town in Belize called Dangriga.

He spent the first three years of his life playing hide and seek
in the neighborhood cemetery.

Like many other immigration kids,
he had no idea what was about to happen.

1984

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, his mother disappeared.

The kid was left to make sense of the same poverty-ridden life
his mom left to escape.

Abandonment and abuse was a daily routine.

1995

Just when the kid entered teen-hood

he received a one-way plane ticket to the U.S. of A.

It was a bittersweet mother-son reunion.

For the first year he called his mom “miss” and “ma’am.”

He didn’t ask any questions.

She didn’t give any answers.

Between the pressures of adolescence,
finding new friends and the strain of chasing a lost childhood,

Daniel Cacho composed his poem “Immigration Kids” during an internship with Youth Radio, and it was aired to a national audience.

immigration status was the least of his worries.
But time slowly cracked the screaming silence in the house like an eggshell.
Tears fell.

1998

A masochistic fear turned pain turned anger.
Lifestyle inevitably catches up.
He was stuck in a stank holding tank.
Thinking. Blinking.
Back to the day he decided that a gun provided
the safety and security he sought.
“ID # & Social Security card please.”
Confused, the immigration kid finds himself
in the Inglewood courthouse, confronted by the public defender,
face to face with deportation or jail time.
By the time he got out of jail, he was 18,
and in the country too long to be eligible for a visa.
Why didn't you do it the right way? was what he really wanted to say to his
mom. But feeling so grateful for having escaped Dangriga,
the kid couldn't confront her,
and what good would it have done any way?
Couple years passed, and he was stepping into adulthood.
Could he go to college, and get a job?
Suddenly, he stood facing a wall he never knew was there,
and it was way too tall to climb.
The boy eventually found an under-the-table-job.
Little pay, lotta taxes.

2002

The kid had a kid. Premature, born before due.
More bills to pay and by the way, rent is due.
This is a bad situation, but worse for who?

The Case for Race

CANDACE COLEMAN

AS A BLACK AMERICAN, I have disliked affirmative action for years. I mean, how could colleges admit blacks, Latinos and American Indians with lower grades and scores, but turn away better-qualified whites and Asians? To me, it seemed like blatant racial discrimination.

Why should colleges and universities lower their standards for minority applicants? It seemed to me that affirmative action allowed exactly the kind of unequal treatment people have been fighting against in the Civil Rights Movement for thirty years.

I thought that affirmative action went against the Constitution, specifically the Fourteenth Amendment and its provisions that persons shall not be discriminated against based on race, sex, creed, or ethnicity. I used to agree with those who think the Constitution is a “color-blind” document and those who think Americans should consider race as an irrelevant issue to ensure equality for all. But is the Constitution really color-blind? Is race really irrelevant in America? I don’t think so.

Most of all, I opposed affirmative action because to a certain extent I believed it diminished my accomplishments as a minority. Being a black American, I didn’t want to face charges of being unqualified, unworthy and unwelcomed. I’m really conscious of people saying behind my back, “She only got into this school because she’s black.”

But for the past few months, I have been doing a lot of reading on affirmative action, and it has changed my opinion. With so much racial inequality still in America, policies like affirmative action level the playing field and actually make our society more just. Remember, it wasn’t too long

Candace Coleman wrote “The Case for Race” at age seventeen, as a student at Marymount High School in Los Angeles. Her essay was first published online in WireTap.

ago when people of color were barred from even applying to colleges, universities and certain jobs because they were minorities.

I read a speech by former President Lyndon Johnson that really influenced my change of opinion. In a speech at Howard University in 1965, President Johnson stated, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.”

Johnson’s assertion had a significant impact on affirmative action policies, and ultimately has changed the minds of many Americans—including mine—on the subject. Now I look at affirmative action as a kind of compensation for past discrimination, including slavery and legal segregation.

Racism today is not as obvious as it was in the past; there aren’t people of color drinking from different water fountains. But when I open my eyes and honestly look around at the world around me, I see that racial inequality still exists. We live in a world with linguistic profiling, where people turn you down for jobs on the phone because they think you’re black or Latino from the way you talk. Things like racial profiling happen daily when the police pull over black men in nice cars because they look “suspicious.” Notice that the mostly white suburban schools have better resources than the mostly black and Latino inner-city schools that lack teachers and safe facilities.

A common misconception that many people have about affirmative action is that it lowers the standards for black, Latino and American Indian students in the college application process.

Take, for example, the case of the University of Michigan Law School being brought to the Supreme Court to determine whether the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment forbids giving one ethnic group or minority special advantages over another. The petitioners/plain-tiffs in the case against the University of Michigan claim that affirmative action lowers admissions standards for minority applicants, which creates hostilities between white and minority students. According to University

of Michigan's own data, white students who were admitted to the University of Michigan had an average GPA lower than that of black students.

Also, over the past ten years, the acceptance rate for white students—meaning the percentage of applicants from a particular ethnic group that are accepted—at the University of Michigan Law School was still higher than the acceptance rate for black or Latino students, and was second only to the rate of acceptance for American Indian students (who still only make up 2 percent of the student population). It's important to step back from the argument to recognize that even with affirmative action policies in place, the University of Michigan is still more than 70 percent white.

In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 209, a ballot initiative that said race cannot be considered as a factor for hiring or admissions in any state institution. After the University of California system enacted the ban against affirmative action, schools like UC Berkeley found that the admittance rates of underrepresented minority students dropped by 14 percent in 1997. The freshman class at UCLA this year has only 281 blacks out of 10,507 incoming students. The decreasing number of minority students detracts from the learning process for all students because it limits the range of perspectives present in class discussions.

When white, black, Asian, Latino, Arab and other students are brought together in a classroom, they can better understand their differences and destroy racist stereotypes that have been so ingrained in our nation's mentality. I met a professor at UCLA who told me affirmative action programs have actually decreased racial hostilities between different groups because of this classroom learning process; when students learn in a more tolerant and diverse environment, everyone benefits from the experience.

I can't imagine being in a class where the discussion is on a particular ethnic group or culture, and there is no one with in-depth knowledge on the subject present. How can a group of all-white students have a serious discussion about slavery, bilingual education, immigration, racism or even affirmative action without recognizing that they are missing some key perspectives in the argument?

Without diversified student bodies, many minority students (including

those at the University of Michigan) are forced to be the “official speakers” for their race. As a black student at a mostly white high school, I’ve helped my classmates understand more about the black experience, but I do get tired of being the “official representative” of my race. Diversity alleviates this pressure on students like me.

Minority students might receive a slight preference when they are admitted into a particular institution, but they have to continue to work hard to earn their school grades just like every other student. Furthermore, race is just one of the many preferences that people can have when applying to college. Many students at my school abhor affirmative action on the one hand, but when it comes to asking one of daddy’s friends on Columbia’s Board of Trustees for a favor—you can bet they start believing in preferences. Schools may give affirmative action to minority students, but regardless of test scores, rich people have always gotten seats in the nation’s most selective colleges and universities by relying on insider preferences.

The *Wall Street Journal* took a look at the practice of “legacy preferences”—a.k.a. white people’s affirmative action—in which the children of alumni are admitted to colleges over better-qualified applicants. Some schools like to admit applicants with alumni ties because they get money for doing so. For example, Al Gore and President George W. Bush have fathers who attended Harvard and Yale, respectively. When applying for college, both Al and George had SAT scores lower than 1300 and bad grades from the prep schools they attended. But the fact that their fathers, who were U.S. Senators, generously gave Harvard and Yale buckets of cash for alumni funds was given a higher priority during the selection process than their academic qualifications as students.

It’s clear to me that everyone gets a share of preferences. So if wealthy people, athletes, legacy applicants and poor people are all given preferences, why can’t underrepresented minorities also get a little consideration?

Getting into college is never solely based on one’s academic merit. Grades and test scores are important, but what a student can bring to a university community can sometimes be even more significant.

Untouchable

TELVI ALTAMIRANO

NOWADAYS IT'S HARD TO FIND many teen virgins—so why am I still a virgin? Why am I still part of the V-squad? Lots of people have asked me that. (Well, mostly boys.)

It seems to me that every little girl has given it up “just because.” I plan to lose my virginity to someone that deserves it, not the first little boy that tells me I should.

I don't choose to be a virgin because I have to; I choose to be one because I want to. I was brought up in a home where sex before marriage is wrong, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to make my own choices. In the end it's really up to me to decide. People can tell me what's right, what's wrong, and what other people might think, but hey! I know what I think, and nobody's advice and no boy's persuasion is going to change my mind.

I've heard it all, from “When you gonna let me hit it?” to, “If you really liked me you would do it.” I really think I've heard every reason that could possibly cross a boy's mind on why I should give it up. I've been in that position, when you think you know the person and you're really starting to like this person and you wish you could give him your everything. Then you realize you can't, and this person starts giving you all these reasons . . .

“Baby, I love you, and I wanna show you how much I love you.”

Ha! Please, you've known me for two weeks and you love me? And you expect me to give you something I've been saving for 15 years? I like you, but heck, I don't like you that much.

I've been through a lot of tough decisions that only I can make, a lot of

Telvi Altimirano wrote “Untouchable” at age fifteen, as a sophomore at Del Valle High School in Austin, Texas. She wrote the piece as part of a summer writing camp with the Breakthrough Collaborative.

persuasion, but guess what? It didn't work, because here I am, still a virgin, still standing on my own two feet, like always.

My mom thinks I can't make my own choices. She sees me as a little innocent child that couldn't possibly go through any pressure, especially to take such a decision. I mean, what teens got to worry about? We ain't got no bills to pay; we ain't got no kids to take care of. Fo' sho we don't, but we do have decisions to make—decisions parents aren't around to make for us. Our choice to have sex, our choice to use drugs, our choice to choose our friends, is our choice.

So, back to the point: Why am I still a virgin?

My virginity is the thing I'm most proud of, the thing I value the most, the thing that only I can control. Because it's mine, and because ain't nobody just gonna take it from me.

My virginity says a lot about me: about my self-respect, my image, and my decision-making. My virginity is part of me and if I decide to share it with someone, heaven trust, it's not going to be just anybody, it's going to be the one.

I'm not saying girls that aren't virgins are worth less; I'm saying I feel like I'm worth more because I am. I'm proud to answer, "Of course I'm a virgin," when I'm asked, and repeat "I know it's good," after somebody tells me it's good. I'm proud I have such a gift to offer to the right person, I'm proud of myself for making it this far, 'cause I don't know many teen girls that can say they have not had sex and they are happy. I know I can, and that whatever happens I'm going to make the right choice. I know whoever I give it to better be glad I decided to share something so pure and valuable as my virginity.

Forget the Corsage

ADAM GAUZZA

I F I'M SURE OF ONE THING, it's the fact that I make a great prom date. When a girl asks me to be her date, it makes me feel I have something unique to offer. And I do—my great dancing ability, sense of style, charming personality and a talent with arranging flowers.

Since freshman year, I have been to eight proms, and my own senior ball hasn't even happened yet. But, believe it or not, I would quickly give up my track record and my tux if it meant I could go to the prom with the person of my choice. Although I have a great time at every dance I attend, I always feel a faint yet distinct awkwardness grip my stomach when I hear the words: "This is my *friend*, Adam."

I think it is much easier for a person to bring a significant other to a prom even if she would have more fun with a "friend-date." Being dubbed a "friend-date" at a prom is like being strapped with the uncomfortable title of "uncle." But if a guy is your boyfriend, he is your boyfriend—nothing awkward or uncomfortable about it.

All this is not to say I am ungrateful to the beautiful girls who have graciously asked my company in the past. The awkwardness and discomfort I speak of are about my own about personal feelings.

Just once, I would like to go to my prom with someone I can call my significant other, someone I could call my boyfriend—without having to take ten minutes to explain our relationship or listen to others say what's weird about it. Some might say, why not just do what makes me happy and not worry about what others think. But it's not that easy. My high school

Adam Gauzza wrote "Forget the Corsage" while in high school in Pennsylvania, and it was originally published in Teaching Tolerance magazine. A revised and expanded version later appeared in the New York Times.

career will end soon. Unfortunately, I know the “someday” when this is no longer taboo will not suddenly happen in June, in time for my senior ball. I can accept this, and I would never want to cross a line that could make the majority of my class, or the faculty, feel uneasy. I could even be kicked out for crossing that line. Or if not kicked out, I could be monitored the whole night and gossiped about for years to come.

As unthinkable as this may seem, it is the truth. While it would be a milestone in some people’s eyes, to others, it would invoke a wrath never seen before. Facing that wrath on my special night is not a risk I am willing to take at this point. No matter whom I take as my date, I always have an enjoyable time at a prom. Just once, though, I’d like to be able to attend with my ideal date, matching boutonnières and all.

Culture

MIKAYLAH BOWMAN

WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD I used to ride my purple bike down to the projects, I'd find Nick's house and bang on his screen door, he'd poke his head around the corner, I could see the television set, the fan in the living room blowing with little strings of tinsel hanging helplessly in the wind. He'd smile, really big white teeth, and throw on his shoes.

I always let him ride my bike since his had gotten stolen, he let me sit on the handlebars and we rode to the recreation center. The Rec Center was falling apart, it always smelled bad but everyone tried to stay optimistic. The vending machines were always empty and the volunteers were scarce.

Nick and I would raid the activities closet and find the old battered up mitts, the bat and search for the one baseball they had there. When we had everything we'd run around the different rooms in the Rec Center yelling, "Baseball! Baseball! Let's go!" Kids dropped their low air basketballs and toy cars, they tied their laces and ran out to the shabby field outside.

We played for hours, I sucked and so did Nick but he told the best jokes when someone struck out, we were always making fun of each other in really nice ways.

I was always "the white girl" if I wasn't Mikaylah, they asked me what a white girl was doing at the Rec Center, I told them, "playing baseball." They'd laugh, saying, "Well, trying to at least."

A few girls got to know me and invited me to play double dutch with them, they sang really complicated songs I couldn't understand, I was scared at first. One girl named Courtney squinted in the sun and stared at me for a little while. I smiled and she shook her head, a pity headshake. With

Mikaylah Bowman lives in Austin, Texas and attends the Griffin School. She wrote "Culture" at age fifteen, and published it on her blog, Clashliver.

time and the help of the Rec girls I learned to jump-rope really well and even got good enough to learn some of their songs. Double dutch was like dancing and at the same time it was common ground for the neighborhood kids, when it wasn't your turn you braided hair and told gossip or talked about Dad hitting Mom or how hard it was to go for so long without eating.

Courtney and I tied in the double dutch tournament that year. One day when we went out for another game of baseball someone had taken all of the bases from the field, none of us knew why anyone would want to steal a bunch of banged-up bases but Nick whispered, "People know why they need stuff out here, better not to ask."

I nodded but had no idea what he meant.

To make up for it we found big sticks and laid them around the field. The games resumed.

You don't understand the beauty in concrete, in self-expression, in fire hydrants unhinged and mangled faces until you meet these kids. And it isn't a bad thing, no not even close.

I was unaware of the cultural impact this was having on me. I learned about graffiti, about the power plant they refused to shut down in the East side that was making residents sick, about music, about poetry, about the political outlaws that mattered, about real hardship, what it was like to live in government housing and at the same time, how incredibly similar I was to these kids. They offered comfort in places that no one else could. We were a family every day after school, sometimes people didn't understand me or us or them. But it didn't matter.

I stopped going back when I turned eleven. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I was in junior high, maybe getting sick made me too tired to play baseball or double dutch, maybe it was because Nick and I had lost touch—as friends in very different situations tend to do.

Sometimes I ride my bike down by the Rec Center and see the girls singing, braiding hair, and jump roping, I see other kids playing baseball and teasing in their timeless communal way.

Things have changed so much.

But some things haven't.

My River

RAFAEL ESPINOZA

My river has a bridge
where I like to sit,
dangling my legs,
and listen.

Lots of things change quickly,
but the river takes its time.
And for some reason that's comforting.

The summer-green grass
whispers excitedly
as if passing on secrets.
The trees murmur wisely,
nodding with the wind.

The birds gossip,
and there are rustles and an occasional splash
as various animals
go about living.

And then there is the river,
which passes on heedless of all,
intent always to push forward.

Rafael Espinoza wrote "My River" at age fourteen, as a student at Broadmoor Middle Magnet School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. His poem won a prize from River of Words, an annual environmental poetry and art contest.

As it flows beneath me it seems to say
hello and goodbye at once—
“Must be moving,
there is so much to see!”
It reminds me that life is an adventure.

And whatever bad feelings I brought with me,
the river carries them away.

Rivers make good friends.
They help you remember
what the world makes you forget.

Worrying About Family in Palestine

LAILIE IBRAHIM

UNLIKE MY MOTHER, who has been glued to the television watching news updates, I refuse to sit and soak in all the killing and carnage going on in the world. I'm a full-blooded Palestinian Muslim born in America, and in my house our biggest concern right now is what's going on in the Middle East. As news from the West Bank slowly trickles in to the States and I get glimpses of the situation there, I dread the call that will inform us that one of the nine family members remaining has been blown up, beaten, or shot to death. We had a close call recently when my uncle Ziad had his fingers blown off by a motion-detecting mine that was left in a plastic bag on the side of the road. Another reason I don't like to watch the news is because I like to keep an open mind and watching may only incite hatred towards Israelis, which is something that has proved itself to be far from a solution.

I think that during the September 11, 2001 attacks, many of us in America got a glimpse of what the occupied territories of Palestine are like every day. Except, what happened in New York is over and our country is getting back on its feet. What's happening in Palestine is continuous and has been going on for fifty-two years. My fourteen-year-old cousin Donya just finished one of the most difficult school years she has faced in her seven years living in the West Bank, and her troubles had little to do with the school curriculum. In a recent phone conversation Donya told me about a grueling hour-and-a-half commute to school that would take ten minutes, if it weren't for the checkpoints in between. In the morning she

Lailie Ibrahim's "Worrying About Family in Palestine" was first published in Teaching Tolerance magazine.

leaves the village hours before her first class and walks nearly a mile to reach one of many taxis it takes to get there.

On June 8, several days into her remaining week of school, during finals week, Donya said she climbed a mountain to avoid a checkpoint from fear of being killed. “That day they wouldn’t let anyone pass,” she said. “They start shooting at anybody if they passed.” She wasn’t so lucky on her trip home. Israeli soldiers opened fire on their taxis after refusing passage for her and many other students trying to find an alternative way home to their neighboring villages. She spent the night in Ramallah with a relative before returning home safely on the same road the next day. “And they call us terrorists,” she said. “That day I felt that they were the terrorists.”

In 1995, after my freshman year of high school, I left to visit Palestine as a change of pace. Although I had visited during the summers of 1983, 1987 and 1992, for three months each time, the last trip turned into a four-year stay. It was only living there that I found the truth, and of what it was really like to travel from point A to point B. It felt like I was holding my life in a loose pocket where it could easily be lost. I recall being stopped at checkpoints and treated with hostility as Israeli soldiers in military fatigues checked for “anything suspicious.”

I recall being seven years old, walking in the narrow marketplace in Arab Jerusalem that surrounded Al-Aqsa mosque, covering my eyes and mouth with my shirt so I wouldn’t inhale tear gas. With the prominent displays of American flags in the wake of September 11, 2001, I have often been reminded of how, during a 1987 visit, Israeli soldiers entered our village and took down all the Palestinian flags on display. Later that summer, as I was buying a falafel sandwich in the Ramallah marketplace, I saw a child being dragged by his collared shirt and put into the back of an Israeli jeep. In 1992, I remember walking in the same marketplace and seeing snipers looking down at us from our own buildings.

People continue to call Palestinians terrorists, and the media focuses on the “suicide bombings” that continue to taint the reputation of those

Palestinians who support a nonviolent solution, but they fail to cover little Arab villages like mine which are flanked by Israeli settlements and denied basic necessities. In January an Israeli tank burst the main water pipe in my village and the residents spent seven days without running water. While hoping that the occupation and oppression ends and Palestine is finally recognized an independent state, my family remains confined to their homes as the cycle of violence continues.