

## SPEAKING DIFFERENTLY TOGETHER

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Hard workers, innovators, original thinkers, and inspired doers - these are young people of today. Creating a project or product that would benefit the community is a wheel turner, for sure. But that's one thing. Implementing it is another. Yet, I believe it would benefit communities in a way that is powerful and sustainable.

It is excruciatingly limiting to think about diversity and inclusion in black and white. Diversity is more than race, inclusion is deeper than casual kindness, and equity is a necessary precursor to progress. There is complex diversity in economic status, race, politics, age, sexuality, learning/coping ability, etc. But there is simple and innocent diversity as well, within hobbies, favorite foods, flowers, and childhood memories. Inclusion strikes teenagers as asking someone to sit with them at lunch or inviting them to hang out. Surely, noble efforts to make everyone feel included. Yet, it is crucial to ask if these efforts are only skin deep. Does everyone feel like they are being listened to and understood, not just heard? Are all friends sitting together but isolating one another? Does everyone feel like they belong and are not entertained as a pity friend? Questions such as these push the oft times undetectable barriers of societal definitions of the terms. *This is at the heart of my project.*

In summer 2021, I teamed up with my mother to create *Speaking Differently Together*: an essay contest with a vision to provide a channel for young minds like mine to create an inclusive society. Our aim was to start the conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion, while harnessing the raw potential and unique perspectives of the ever-evolving world that is filled

with both creativity and complexity. We may not know it yet, but we understand that because of our perspectives, we have the potential to build communities, lead nations, and foster families that realize that the world is unique in its diversity and universal in its commonality – the very combination that makes us stronger together. In the face of challenges in our world today, this is more important than ever.

That raw potential shone in the 48 brilliant submissions we received from youth between grades 4 - 12. Diversity and inclusion are central to the way we view the world, through opposing viewpoints, and therefore, opposing solutions. Yet, we only hit the tip of the iceberg with the contest. There is a need to dig deeper and with persistence to bridge the generational gap amongst youth and between the youth and grown-ups. The conversation must continue and pervade the thought processes of all generations of thinkers and doers if we are to dream of a world that is just and safe for all.

As we emerge on the other side of the pandemic, I am excited to host the contest for the second year this fall. In addition, I wish to open the doors to all in Ohio, and someday beyond, to invite adults to the conversation through forums and active debates. When families join as one, their collective consciousness will scope out diverse perspectives and meaningful discussions to integrate them into our new definitions will follow. A small first step towards involving families and communities was to raise scholarship money (\$2300+) through self-sustaining crowdsourcing. We planted a seedling of inspiration in the minds of over 500 families via text, email, word of mouth, and social media: a seedling that is bound to sprout and bloom. What's more, we sponsored a Toastmasters Club for D,E, &I!

Creating leaders of the next generation who operate with empathy and unrelenting commitment to the notion that all humanity is created equal is hard, deliberate work. It will take everything we have to offer and demand some more. If we are to succeed, we must work together to invest in learning how to create a society that is equitable, one that can only be built by intentionally exposing ourselves to the vulnerability that learning about diversity creates and exploring the many ways to provide inclusion at home, in our schools, workplaces, and the society all around.

*When we learn to speak differently together, we truly progress.*