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English 1301 Mon.-Thurs. 2:30-5:00

Essay #1 Reflective Essay

6 June 2012

The Harmony System

I remember laughing to myself and thinking, “This has to be a joke, it’s smaller than my elementary school,” as we pulled up to a building that looked like it was, at one point, a rundown daycare center. “Is this it? It’s so small!” I said as we got out of the car.

“Yes, Travis, this is your new school,” my mom said.

“But it’s so, ugly!” I replied.

“Do you want to go to Sharpstown?” she asked.

“No,” I said reluctantly.

I had just graduated from elementary school and was getting ready for middle school. I was zoned to attend Sharpstown Middle School, and then Sharpstown High School, in Houston, Texas; the problem was that these schools in Sharpstown had reputations for being dangerous schools to attend, for me especially, being a white kid. I would have had a target painted on my back the second I walked through the door. Therefore, my mom was determined to get me into whatever other school that would take me. Conveniently while my mom was on her desperate search for an alternative school, a brochure came in the mail. The brochure advertised for a school that was just starting out named Harmony Science Academy. It was a twenty minute drive to this school versus a five minute walk to Sharpstown; however, my mother and I both agreed that anything to avoid going to Sharpstown would be worth it.

Harmony Science Academy orientation was on a hot August day in 2006. I was 11 years old, but I was far from being some naive little kid. I had been aware of the discrimination one could face in this world since at least the fourth grade, the time I was first confronted with school fights and bullies. I walked into the door of this “rundown day care” and found myself in a colorful lobby. I don’t mean the walls or the ceiling, but rather the people, who were all of different colors, religions, and races. Many of these people were wearing strange clothing that I had never seen before. My family took their seats in the lobby next to an African family. They were wearing the strangest clothing I had ever seen in my life. The clothing of all these people was as varied as they were; bright blues, yellows, tans, and greens. The clothing looked as though it was very heavy, and many of the women were wearing strange scarfs that covered their heads. (Later I would learn that these are called Hijabs, a covering made of various cloths many Muslim Women wear to cover their hair, as a part of their religious traditions.)

I took my own seat next to the African family’s oldest son. “Hello, my name is Fahd Alatishe,” he said, with a large, friendly grin.

“Fahada Tishe?” I replied, thinking it was the most outlandish name I had ever heard.

“Fahd Alatishe,” he enunciated clearly so that I could hear every syllable.

“Oh, okay, Fahd, I’m Travis. Where are you from, Fahd?”

“I am from Nigeria, a country in Africa.”

This is when I noticed his strange accent. We continued our conversation, discovering that we had gone to the same elementary school, liked the same television shows, and both loved history. Then after we had both been interviewed by the school admissions counselor, we went home. Fahd would later grow to become one of my closest friends at Harmony.

A few weeks later I had my first class; it was the first time I was ever in a classroom that I wouldn’t be in for the rest of the school day. I had no idea how to change from class to class. This school was small, but that didn’t make it any less strange or complicated. No one else seemed worried about it.

When I finally got to my homeroom class I noticed Fahd sitting in the back alone. He looked uncomfortable in his surroundings, but even more so in his western clothing, an ugly bright red uniform shirt with a blue stripe. We all had to wear it, but I imagined he was most uncomfortable because he was used to clothing that covered his entire body. Then I noticed there were many kids who were coming to talk to him.

I then felt some strange discomfort. All of the kids around me were all so different, yet they didn’t seem to realize it. The Black, White, and Hispanic kids were all sitting together talking to a small Turkish boy; the strangest part of all that was that the other kids were not teasing him for being short, or mocking his accent, as I would have expected, but instead genuinely asking him questions in an effort to get to know him. His name was Mesut. He turned out to be a friendly, well-spoken, and intelligent student; one who would thrive in this healthy environment, eventually becoming our valedictorian.

“Take out your journals children, my name is Mr. Aslan,” our teacher said in a heavy Turkish accent. Instead of laughing or teasing the teacher for his accent, all the kids obediently pulled out their notebooks and waited patiently for further instruction. He was very different from any teachers I had ever had before. Mr. Aslan was very patient and understanding. After class I asked him, “How come everyone is listening to you?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean how come everyone is getting along?”

Mr. Aslan smiled and said, “You must be from a traditional public school, don’t worry everything will be different here.”

“Why is it different here?”

“Because, Travis, we have chosen your classmates carefully.”

I could not believe it; “How did the school manage to find so many good apples?” I asked myself. Then I realized that all of these kids got the same brochure in the mail that I did, and they were all looking for something different from what public schools had to offer, perhaps a peaceful environment with friendly peers and competent teachers; that was the Harmony School System.

Harmony shaped me into the young adult I am today. As I grew in the school system we joked about the ugliness of the building and the low quality of the food, but there was always the underlying truth that we really appreciated this school. At the time I graduated there were hundreds of Harmony, and other affiliated, schools all over the country. And it continues to grow. I attended Harmony from the sixth grade all the way through the time I graduated from high school with the same 65 people that I had grown to love as brothers and sisters. Each of them had taught me priceless lessons throughout my school career and it all started that first day of school in 2006 when they taught me that in the right environment, with enough will power, different people can come together, cooperate, and flourish, despite their different appearances.