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4th Grade

“Diverse Voices, Stronger Nation”

“Your Indian language is hurting my ears,” a kid said sharply on the school bus that day.

I was with two of my friends who were chatting. All three of us are of South Asian Indian heritage.

No one said anything in response.

But the comment didn’t feel right to me. I felt offended and put down.

Later, I discussed this with my family, and that is when I learned about *microaggressions* and *xenophobia*. Microaggressions are subtle, sometimes unintentional comments insulting a person’s identity. Xenophobia is the irrational fear or dislike of something considered “different” or “foreign.”

It seems this fear of “different” is making some people think in terms of “us” vs. “them.” Is that why there was so much controversy over the recent Super Bowl halftime performance by Puerto Rican artist Bad Bunny, because he performed entirely in Spanish? Some called this Spanish-language performance “un-American.”

Xenophobia might be growing because of rising anti-immigrant feelings in some parts of society today. Over centuries, immigrants have come to the US seeking better opportunities. They have contributed to labor, business, technology, cuisine - shaping a diverse American culture. But they have also faced discrimination—for example, the Immigration Act of 1924, which had a national-origin quota favoring immigrants from western Europe. It restricted and prevented immigration of others based on nationality.

Civil rights activists like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, the Freedom Riders, Fannie Lou Hamer, and many others *blazed the trail* in demanding equal rights and dignity. New laws were passed because of their efforts—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The momentum of the Civil Rights Movement paved the way for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended the discriminatory national-origin quota.

Over decades, leaders of our country have highlighted the role of immigrants.

“Every aspect of the American economy has profited from the contributions of immigrants.”

—John F. Kennedy, 35th US President

“Immigration is not just a link to America’s past; it’s also a bridge to America’s future.”

—George H. W. Bush, 41st US President

But now, it seems the rights of immigrants are under threat once again. There are news reports that aggressive tactics are being used today to question and detain immigrants, often regardless of their legal status. Sometimes immigrant homes are being entered and arrests being made without a proper warrant. Poor conditions are reported in centers where arrested immigrants are being held, including delay of medical care, separation of children from families, and violation of due process. I researched what “due process” means. It means a “constitutional right that gives everybody the opportunity to defend their rights in court.” With all this happening, it seems immigrant rights are among the most important civil rights issues today. Other issues include rights of women and people in other minority groups.

We are the “land of the free,” as proudly stated in our national anthem.

But are we all *equally* free today?

To me, freedom means the “pursuit of happiness” as promised in the Declaration of Independence.

Freedom means my worth is not dictated by my ethnic background but my character and accomplishments. Here, my thought resembles MLK Jr.’s comments in his inspiring “I Have A Dream” speech. When you stand up for racial justice, I guess you start thinking alike!

If I had the opportunity to advocate for civil rights, my slogan would be “Diverse Voices, Stronger Nation.” In the midst of dividing forces today, this slogan would serve to unite and remind us that our strength comes from our diverse backgrounds.

How can we continue to advocate for equal respect for all? At school, we read a book called *Nowhere Boy* by Katherine Marsh, about Ahmed. Ahmed was like any other kid—wanting to make friends, to be with his family. But just because he was a Muslim refugee, people stereotypically thought of him as “other” and “dangerous.” Reading about Ahmed’s struggles helped to build empathy, helped to see that so-called “others” are not that different from us. We all need to read more books like this.

We can increase awareness by having more open and brave conversations about civil rights violations in our society today. Topics like microaggression shouldn’t only be discussed in a family of immigrant heritage; it should be discussed in all families. So, everyone can stand in solidarity for social justice.

Because, as MLK Jr. rightly said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”