

A SEA OF WHITE

She sits in her office, surrounded. As she walks through the halls, a sea of white flows around her.

Romona Miller, KHS assistant principal and teacher of 26 years, is nearly alone in a school that has been her home for decades. The athletic awards of her daughters line the hallways outside Denver Miller Gym, gleaming against a faded red-brick background. The feet of countless students fall onto the track, pressing into the wide, white letters spelling out her husband's name. The Miller family name is everywhere at KHS, yet still the color of Miller's skin is almost nowhere to be found in its teaching staff.

"I would like to say race has never affected me at Kirkwood," Miller said. "But that [is] totally not true."

While Miller was surrounded by the homogenous staff of KHS, Clarke Shead, senior, sat in her AP United States History class, also surrounded. Not only was she a student of color in the mostly white classroom, but she said she felt as though she couldn't relate to the person teaching the course. All she wanted was to learn the content, but as her teacher began another lesson on the enslavement of her people, the only thing she could think about was the whiteness of their skin.

"There are definitely times I wish I could be talking to someone who looks like me," Shead said. "[African-American students] don't get the chance to relate to our teachers, and they don't get to understand me. I think there needs to be more [minority teachers] because you can go your entire KHS career without having a single [one], which is very bad."

For Darnel Frost, Kirkwood School Board president, being African-American is something that has affected him every day. When he attended McClure High School in the Ferguson/Florissant School District, he recalls having several impactful African-American teachers. And after years of diligent work—years of outworking other candidates—he came to KSD only to find that the color of his skin was the first thing everyone saw. He said he felt labeled because, within the KSD faculty, people who look like him were, and still are, few and far between.

"Every single day, I'm impacted by race," Frost said. "Every single day, I'm discussing race. Every single day, I live race. It's what you do when you're an African-American person. We don't want things to be that way. We want to make sure that diversity is represented."

But diversity at KHS is almost nonexistent. ◇

A VERY SMALL MINORITY

Four are African-American. One is Asian. One is Hispanic. They walk the halls of KHS as the sole six minority teachers in the building, and only four of them are full time. Surrounding them is the majority, the 95.7 percent, the skin-tone prevalent in every classroom. Surrounding these six minority teachers are 116 white men and women. That means for every teacher that is not white, there are almost 20 who are. In a school whose student body is almost 17 percent African-American, the African-American population in the teaching staff is a mere 2.5 percent, according to KSD human resources.

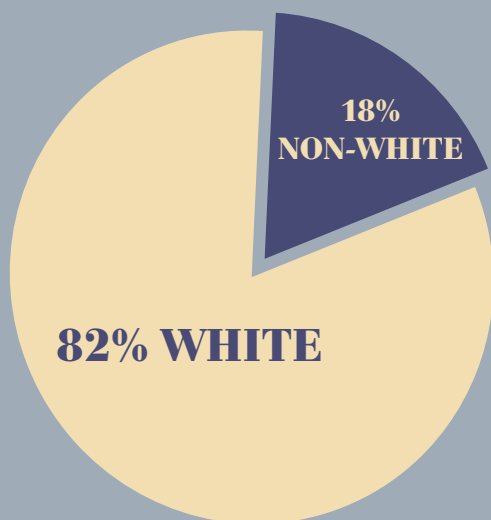
While the district-wide division is less pronounced—90.3 percent white and 8.1 percent African-American—it is still far from the student body ratio. But according to Dr. Michael Havener, KHS principal, this issue is by no means exclusive to KHS. It appears to be a St. Louis-wide trend, with the teaching demographics in Webster, Clayton and Lindbergh being 91.0, 91.6 and 96.9 percent white, respectively. That being said, Havener said KHS can still strive to do better in meeting its demographic goals.

"At the high school, we have not seen the results we are looking for," Havener said. "I think it is important that people see all individuals from all backgrounds in the teaching profession. I don't want anyone to think that [they] can't be a teacher or that there are only teachers of one race out there. It is important that we have a wide, diverse staff who can bring different backgrounds into the classroom."

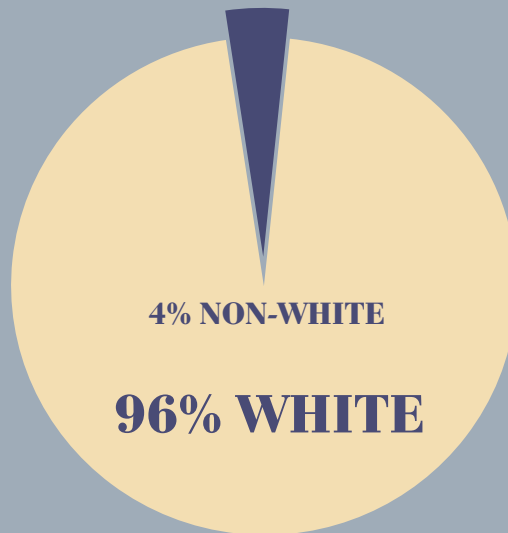
But the KHS administrators are not the only ones who have noticed. It seems students are not only very aware of the problem, but very serious in their will to see it remedied. In fact, 71.4 (150/210) percent of KHS students believe accurate minority representation in the KHS teaching staff is important, and 75.4 percent (156/207) said they wanted to see a more diverse staff. This issue is important to them. It matters. It matters because 63 percent (126/200) of students have all white teachers this year. It matters because 31.5 percent (63/200) have not had a single minority teacher in all of high school. It matters because many students will continue to have a whitewashed collection of teachers.

And it all starts with how a teacher is hired. ◇

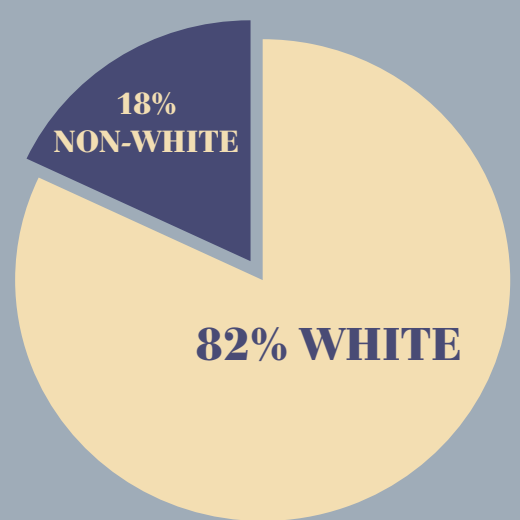
**2017-2018
KSD TEACHERS HIRED**

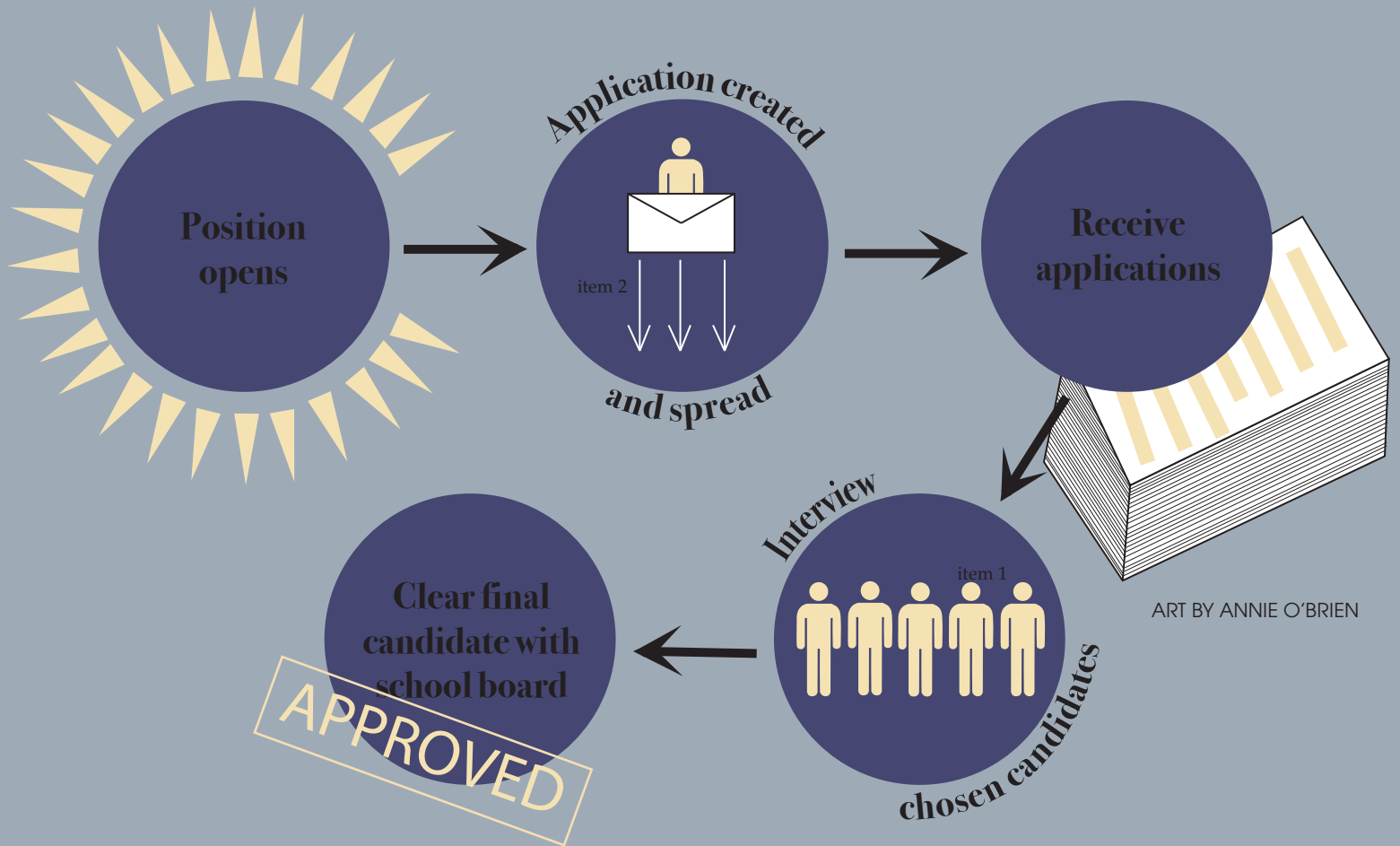


**2017-2018
KHS TEACHERS**



**2017-2018
KSD TEACHING APPLICANTS**





A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

In the heart of the KSD human resources office, Interim Director Cindi Nelson picks up her phone. She hears the voice of a school board member, informing her that a position has opened up. Based off this conversation, she will begin creating an application with essential criteria—personal information, job experience and special skills. When finished, Nelson and her staffers post this application on any forum they can: the KSD website, LinkedIn and state job boards, as well as any content specific publications. Within two weeks, she will have received between 100 and 200 completed applications for the position. The opening in question is for a KSD teacher, and Cindi Nelson has just begun the long, meticulous process of filling it.

“Our goal is to cast the widest net,” Nelson said. “We really look

at each position individually and try to get the word out to as many people as we can that we have an opening [within our staff].”

Once the window for receiving applicants has closed, Nelson’s office will facilitate screenings based on KSD’s four main points of criteria: education, experience, certification and references. She said they also ask applicants to provide a writing sample, which helps paint a picture of their philosophical views as a teacher. Nelson said an applicant with good references, which are essentially just a measure of who they already know within the district, can become an immediate standout. Eventually, the pool of applicants is whittled down to around 15, all of whom will be brought in for a face-to-face interview. Throughout these two rounds of interviews, conducted primarily

by the building administrator and department chair, the applicants are reduced to one final candidate, at which point Havener clears them for school board recommendation. If approved, this individual has now become a staff member of the Kirkwood School District. According to Havener, this hiring system has led to a staff that is, above all else, exceptional.

“We have been very fortunate to hire teachers—outstanding ones—ever since I’ve joined the district,” Havener said. “However, I think we can still hire outstanding teachers and find a well balanced well representative teaching staff at the same time. We are trying to be proactive not only with the district initiatives and things they’re doing, but also trying to be proactive at the high school level in trying to recruit [applicants].”

But while the current hiring

process may be effective in finding qualified, excellent teachers, the consensus among the KSD administration is that it is woefully ineffective in hiring minority teachers. When certification is one of the four key factors, minorities find themselves instantly at a disadvantage; the high school has both the highest level of certification required and by far the lowest percentage of minorities. According to Nelson, when references from a teacher already within the district give applicants a significant advantage, minorities will tend to fall behind, for how many of the 96 percent white staff of KHS know someone who is African-American, Hispanic or Asian? When this hiring system is used without further initiatives, minorities tend to get hired much, much less.

And that’s a fact. ♦



A MISSING CONNECTION

The opportunity to have role models that reflect all students' experiences is a right each KHS student deserves, according to Miller and Frost. To them, KHS shelters kids from the diversity of the real world, and without a staff that mirrors their students, it is harder for minority students to realize their full potential.

"I think for children of color, they need to see themselves reflected in our teaching population," Miller said. "But also for students as a whole, we live in a diverse world, and when they leave here, that is the

be a teacher one day,' because all of their teachers are white. I think [a diverse teaching staff] will help decrease any racial tension to know that we can be taught by any race." According to Miller, these disproportionate rates of discipline are oftentimes a result of this missing connection. However, Miller believes hiring a more diverse staff can change that. She said when students see themselves in their teachers, they become motivated to work harder and focus in class. They might even feel like they belong.

"It helps to have your colleagues

She also said this lack of diverse staff members leads the majority students to fall into the pattern of treating minority students as a demographic instead of who they really are.

"Having more staff members of color or part of a minority gives students a chance to find somebody they connect with on a more personal level rather than trying to push for a connection that isn't there," Zein said. "I think [white teachers] try to push for an understanding, but sometimes it's [difficult] because it's not coming from the heart. It's coming from 'I think you experience this,' not 'I know you experience this.'"

Diversity, according to Frost, is not just a percentage. It is not just a certain ratio of African-American to white. He said diversity is being able to learn from people who are different than yourself, and as of right now, KHS has not been successful in providing its students with such an environment. Rather, KHS has only scratched the surface. Frost said the need for the district to be better is urgent, for if greater diversity can be achieved, KSD will come that much closer to giving its student the tools to be successful.

"To me, [diversity] is about our students," Frost said. "If you can be a student in the Kirkwood School District, and the possibility that you go from kindergarten through high school and not have an African-American teacher... it's not right. Diversity is way too important, and it's important for everyone to be successful. We need diversity, period."

KSD administration recognizes this need, and they are trying to fill it. ◇

"Diversity is way too important, and it's important for everyone to be successful."

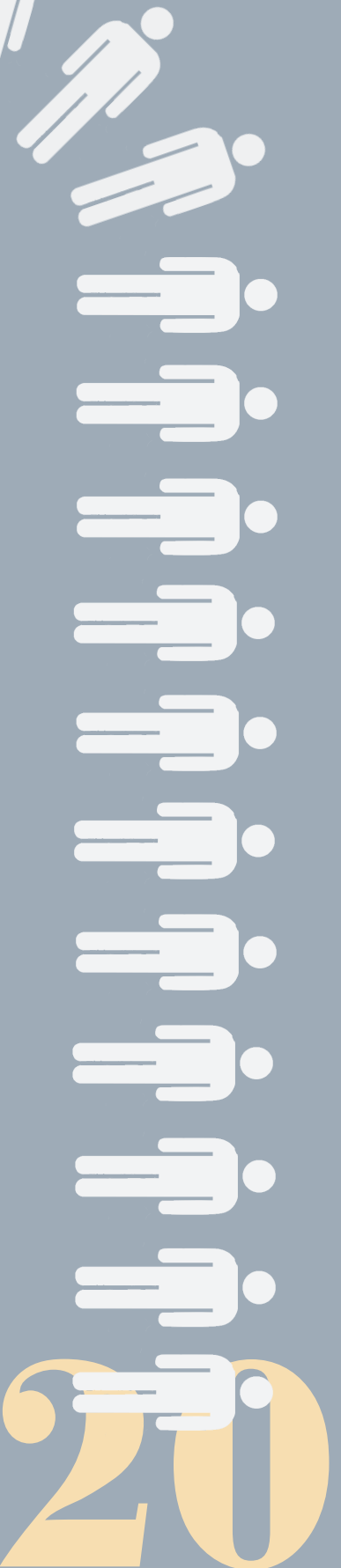
world they are going to live in. It's important to mirror that here so everyone has that true appreciation that this is the world we live in."

Not representing the colorful world outside the walls of the school has its repercussions. Currently, African-American students make up 75 percent of expulsions at KHS, despite accounting for only 14.9 percent of district enrollment. According to Shead, minority students often slip behind white students because only white teachers are glorified as success symbols. She said because of that, some minority students lose interest in school.

"We see teachers teaching classes, and they are smart," Shead said. "They are these symbols of knowledge. But [African-American students] don't get to say 'I could

bring different perspectives." Miller said. "Sometimes, [teachers have] had that 'aha, I didn't think about that' moment. That is something that will naturally come with more diverse staff. Without that, it's really 'I know what I know' or 'I know what I have experienced.'"

Another consequence of this missing teacher diversity is the emotional toll it takes on the minority individuals who feel isolated in the KHS community. When Asha Zein, junior, walks into KHS, she immediately feels everyone's eyes on her hijab. She said it is all people see when they first meet her because of their lack of exposure to other religions. As a student of color as well as a Muslim, she does not feel represented by the KHS staff, a staff too often blinded by her hijab.



A MISSION, A METHOD AND A MESSAGE

In recent years, the KSD administration has been listening. As teachers from all grade levels voiced their inability to connect with all their students, they listened. As minority students revealed their discomfort in talking to teachers about certain topics, they listened. As individuals throughout the district asked why KSD wasn't doing better, they listened. They listened, and now they are acting.

"We are finding [diversity] to be an issue," Havener said. "We've really tried to be proactive, but we have not seen the results we are looking for. But we [do] want that diversity. We want that in our student body and we want it in our teaching staff."

Because diversity is now a top priority, KSD has been trying to reel in as many minority teachers as they can, according to Nelson. However, not all of their efforts have been successful. She said KSD once used the Grow Your Own Teacher Program, which gave current teachers the chance to mentor smaller groups of students interested in education with the hopes they would teach at KHS after college, but it was largely unsuccessful. More recently, KHS has actually offered positions to minority candidates, but has been turned down. One successful initiative, however, is the Minority Recruitment Fair. Started in 2013, the fair has also taken place in 2015, 2017, and the most recent fair resulted in four non-white teachers being brought into the district, according to Nelson. She said the fair is able to create a space where minority candidates are no longer overshadowed by white ones.

"[The fair] for us has been a really great recruiting tool to help improve the diversity of our staff, but we [also] try and improve it and retool it every year and try to get better," Nelson said. "And we are always open to [other] suggestions that folks have."

Other successful efforts include actively networking with other school districts in an effort to discover potential minority hires and extending the time during

which applicants can send in their information, as this would allow the district to have more time to get in contact with any minority teachers who apply. Now, the numbers are starting to change. The percentage of African-Americans hired into the district in the 2016-2017 school year was 14 percent, which just about matches the current student body ratio. And according to Havener and Nelson, KSD is well ahead of the curve when it comes to staff diversity, as neighboring districts are only just now beginning to implement similar initiatives. All in all, they take pride in the district's efforts thus far.

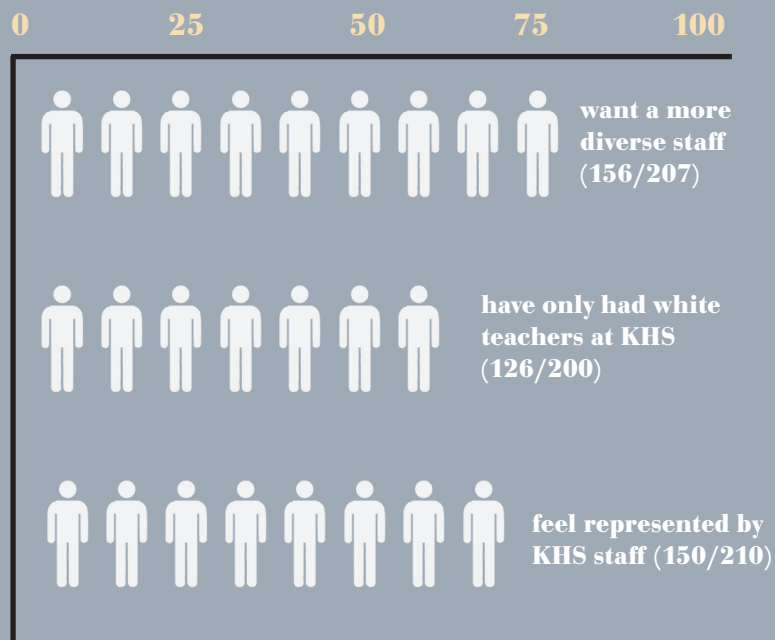
"We need a more diverse staff," Nelson said. "I think it's taken other folks a lot longer to say those words, but we're trying to own the problem, especially when it comes to being vocal about addressing what the problem actually is."

According to Nelson, the district is on track for the student diversity ratio to match the teacher diversity ratio in two years. However, this timetable appears to be overly optimistic. Last year, KSD hired 50 new teachers, nine of whom were not white. In addition, 32 teachers left the district, four of whom were not white. If this pattern were to continue at its current rate, the two ratios would meet in not two, but seven years. But still, the KSD administration has hope. Better, more effective efforts are being set in place according to Havener, and Frost believes the diversity goal is now on the horizon.

"Do I think we're starting in a good place and taking our baby steps toward getting our goal?" Frost said. "Yes, absolutely. But I would tell people you absolutely have to look at it as a process. The goal is to get as diverse as you can, [and] I'm hoping people understand that we're trying to accomplish this. We're trying to make sure our students have what they need to be successful, [because] that's quality education."

It seems that, while nothing is guaranteed, the wait for heightened diversity in KSD might soon be over. ◇

PERCENT OF KHS STUDENTS WHO...



A GOAL: A SEA OF DIVERSITY

For each individual in KSD, an increase in staff diversity looks slightly different.

For Cindi Nelson, increased staff diversity looks like every single open position being filled with a certified, trustworthy teacher, no matter what race. For Miller, increased staff diversity looks like a white principal who says 'I want to have teachers of color.' For Zein and Shead, increased staff diversity looks like a teacher telling them to quiet down and open their books, only this time, the command comes from someone who looks like them. For Dr. Havener, increased staff diversity looks like a school, packed with a mix of students varied in race, culture and beliefs, who are being taught by a faculty that is not only a reflection of them, but an example for others to follow. "I think we can hire outstanding teachers and find a balanced, well-represented teaching staff at the same time," Havener said. "They are one in another. There are well-qualified minority teachers out there. We [just] need to go get them."

For Frost, as he proudly sits in the seat of Kirkwood School Board president, increased staff diversity looks like a classroom where the

issue of race never takes away from a child's education. It looks like a young kid, walking the wide halls of Kirkwood High School, never once believing they can't accomplish their goals because of the color of their skin. It looks like a teacher who never has to be alone in a sea of white, but who instead can thrive in sea of diversity.

"There are great African-American [and] great Asian and Hispanic teachers out there that [we] can find and hire to come into our district," Frost said. "[But] you have to be a well-rounded or well-educated, excellent teacher as well. But [KSD] can have both."

And once this balance is achieved, Frost said, the possibilities are hard to imagine.

"I'm very cognizant of the fact that our kids are watching, [that] they need good role models and good examples," Frost said. "I'm hopeful to provide that. You cannot let [being a minority] distract you from your goals. You can still achieve, but you have to make sure you are diligent and work hard. Because I worked hard to get where I am, and I'm hopeful that it will set an example for other minorities to know that they can achieve this as well." ◇