

## Disrupting injustice, exposing indifference

**UNITED WE STAND:** Senior Tariq Smith (left), sophomore Alondra Caldera (middle) and junior Felix Garkisch (right) stand in the commons representing the minorities of Prospect. Smith, in the vast minority of race and a member of Knights United, speaks out with a megaphone on the adversity experienced by all types of minorities -- not just racial -- while the background of people turn a blind eye. Garkisch identifies as gay and Jewish, while Caldera is Latina. As of the first Knight Voices meeting on Sept. 6, discussion has begun on the prejudice taking place at Prospect and how to deal with it in the future. (photo illustration by Mara Nicolale and Ryan Kupperman)

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When senior and Knights United member Tariq Smith was a freshman, someone walked up to him in the locker room and asked him if he wanted to hear a joke. When he agreed, the student proceeded to make a joke that not only disturbed Smith, but threatened him simply because of the hostility portrayed against his skin color. To this day, it remains one of the most upsetting and offensive jokes Smith has ever heard.

“Hey, what does a chainsaw say to a black person? ... run n\*\*\*a n\*\*\*a, run. Run n\*\*\*a n\*\*\*a.”

According to [illinoisreportcard.com](http://illinoisreportcard.com), Smith is among the 1.2% of students at Prospect who are African-American, joining other groups like Latin/Hispanic (13%), Asian (7.5%), mixed races (3.1%) and Pacific Islander or American Indian (0.1%) in the vast minority at a school that is 75% white.

According to Smith, hearing such racial slurs, which include n\*\*\*a and n\*\*\*\*r (also referred to as the “hard R”), is not uncommon for students at Prospect — especially if you’re a racial minority walking through the halls.

“White people would walk up to me, or to any other person who’s African-American, and they would say ‘Hey, can I get the N-pass?’” Smith said.

By the “N-pass,” Smith is referring to agreed permission for someone to say the N-word, typically for a person who is not African-American.

“I already know that the people who come up asking to say it, already say it. And the fact that you’re asking me ... I don’t know, I find it childish — coming up to me and asking permission for something that shouldn’t be said ... Like, my name is Tariq, just call me Tariq,” Smith said. “Hearing the word ‘n\*\*\*a’ in conversations is natural now. That’s all I hear in the halls when I’m walking down or in the locker room — It’s like the new ‘hey,’ it’s like the new ‘hi.’”

While Smith has been experiencing this throughout his high school career, the topic was first addressed to administration on a large scale during the first Knight Voices meeting on Friday, Sept. 6. According to Principal Greg Minter, Knight Voices is a more diverse version of Principal’s Advisory Council, which was disbanded in favor of Knight Voices.

Because Minter felt that Principal’s Advisory Council was too Caucasian and female-dominated, he asked teachers to hand-select students from every race, grade level, gender and pool of interests to participate in Knight Voices. In addition, every administrator and every division head is asked to attend the meetings which take place during lunch periods of specific meeting days.

Smith, who was selected for Knight Voices, anticipated the meeting to be about school event discussion, such as what everyone thought about homecoming. However, once the issue of prejudice started to come

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### AT PROSPECT...

75% OF STUDENTS ARE WHITE

13% ARE HISPANIC

7.5% ARE ASIAN

3.1% ARE TWO OR MORE RACES

1.2% ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN

0.2% ARE PACIFIC ISLANDER  
AND AMERICAN INDIAN

ACCORDING TO [ILLINOISREPORTCARD.COM](http://ILLINOISREPORTCARD.COM)



# PROGRESS: Dialogue destroys prejudice

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“Once we touched basis on racial issues, that’s when I was like, ‘You know what, I might as well bring it up.’ So, when we started talking about it, I felt better ... that we’re experiencing the issues and we’re facing what is actually happening in the school,” Smith said. “Even though we are talking about it, I still know that it’s not going to change everything, but it is still good to know that we are voicing out what is going on.”

According to Minter, the use of insensitive names was first brought up during fourth period, the first meeting period for Knight Voices. Latino and African-American students alike spoke about some of their experiences at Prospect with racially-insensitive remarks. Minter recalls how one Latina student spoke about people making fun of her name while another Latina spoke about how someone had told her that her body was the shape it was because “She only ate beans and rice.”

The mention of the use of the slur or derogatory remark “beaner” and the “hard R” both stood out to Minter.

“If someone were to ask me, ‘Do you think that this possibly could be going on?’ I’d say, ‘Well yeah, it’s possible,’” Minter said. “[But] I think I can speak for [all the administrators] and say that we had no idea to the degree of how pervasive it really seems to be.”

However, both Smith and Minter mention that, as brought up in the meeting, this type of prejudice is not strictly directed towards racial minorities. Many problems were also reported in regards to sexual orientation and religion with people saying things such as “that’s gay” or “homo.”

“I feel like people who are different would like to see — I don’t know if equality is the word, but I feel like we would want everyone to be fair,” Smith said. “Like not make jokes out of the things that we can’t change, and things that make us who we are.”

Junior Felix Garkisch identifies as both gay and Jewish. Garkisch, who was selected and took part in the Knight Voices discussion, also spoke about his experience dealing with types of homophobia and anti-semitism at Prospect. Garkisch was glad to see these problems addressed in the meeting; however, just like Smith, he is still skeptical on what can be done against it.

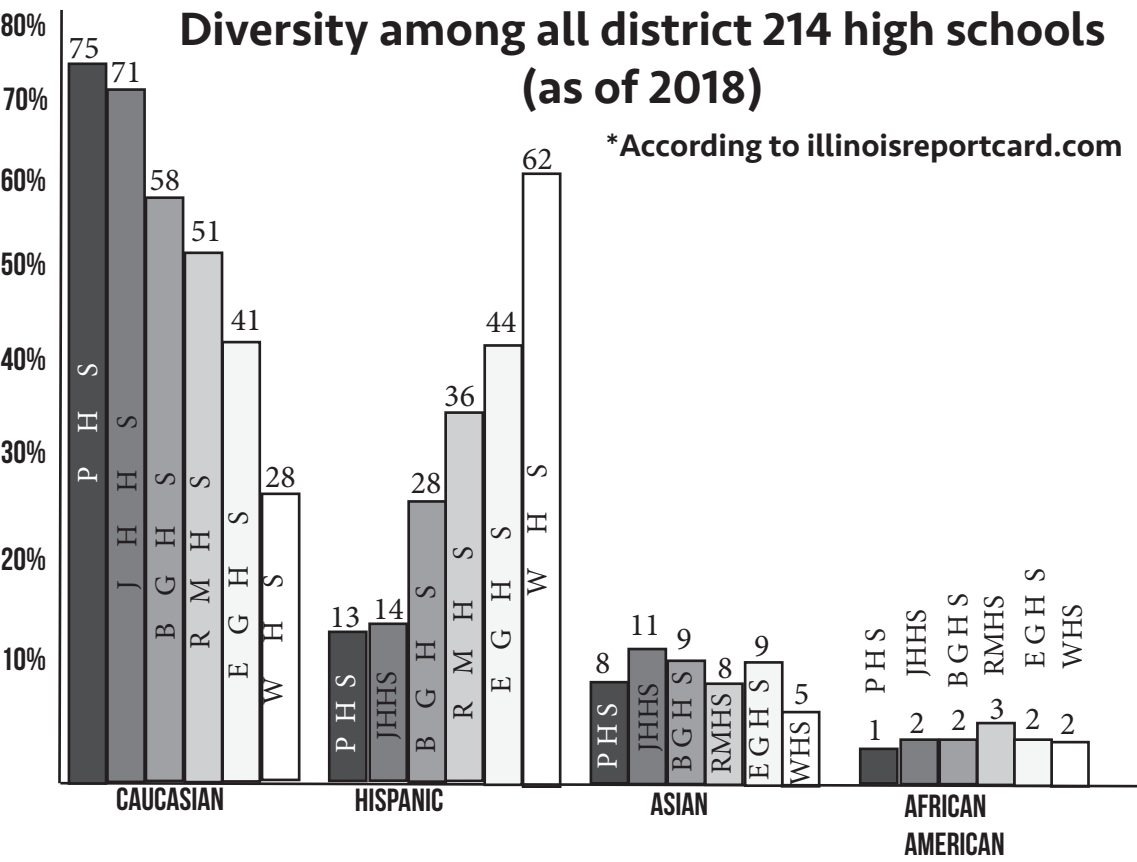
“Regardless of who you are and whether you go through this or not, it’s something that needs to be addressed,” Garkisch said. “A lot of people feel that it is okay to trivialize discrimination in general and almost pretend like it doesn’t exist.”

While he specifies that most slurs he hears are not directed at him but rather simply heard throughout the hallways, Garkisch still feels like he is learning how to deal with those situations.

“[This type of discrimination is] relatively new, but it’s not brand new, so we’ve had a lot of time to discuss it, and I’m just, quite frankly, shocked and a little bit upset that it’s taken us so long to finally get to a point where we’re having that conversation right now when we’ve known about this for such a long time,” Garkisch said.

According to Minter, administration is still thinking about the best way to approach this. Minter doesn’t think a school-wide assembly would help, specifically because he understands that most of what goes on happens out of sight or out of ear-shot from staff.

Consequently, Smith feels that educating people and having conversations with them is the best way to become culturally-aware of



everybody’s situations. Plus, Garkisch would also like to see more conversations about these issues taking place in the future in hopes of creating a safe space where people can openly talk about their experiences. Garkisch also feels that the key to tackling this issue head-on is by making sure as many people are informed as possible.

“I think it’s just, as a school, you can’t change everyone, but I feel like it would help if everyone took the time to learn,” Smith said. “If someone were to go up and talk about what they go through ... and they say how they feel, I highly doubt, unless [others] are just extremely rude, that they would still continue to [be insensitive].”

Minter agrees with this, also emphasizing the idea of educating people to know better.

“I really kind of see it as ignorance. Some people are doing and saying things that they think are funny, but they are not funny — at all. It’s got to stop, and I think having some adults have good conversation with people might help to alleviate some of the situation,” Minter said. “But there’s still just a lot of education that we need to be doing.”

Correspondingly, both Smith and Minter feel that this behavior is coming more out of a place of ignorance and distasteful humor rather than hatred.

“There’s a fine line between joking and disrespecting. And so, I would want — well, I think we would want — instead of being [stereotyped], judged and bullied for our differences, to sit down ... and we learn,” Smith said. “They learn from us, and we learn from them. Basically we just communicate. If you know better, you can do better. [However], that’s not going to change the trolls — the people who do it maliciously, like on purpose.”

As a student, Smith stressed that these types of derogatory remarks have followed him throughout his high school career.

“I started off my high school career with dreads, and the first thing that I heard about it was that I looked like Chief Keef, like Lil Uzi Vert — the black rappers with dreads. I didn’t mind it because I’d

heard it before,” Smith said. “Over time, I got annoyed, and I just said ‘Hey, can we stop that?’ It got to the point where they walked up to me playing one of Lil Uzi Vert’s songs, or Chief Keef’s or whatever, and they were like ‘Heyyy, Lil Uzi Chief Keef’ and all this other stuff. Then, it went from that to jokes. And not like the laughing type of jokes.”

However, Smith didn’t just experience problems with random people in the halls or the locker rooms. While he made a point freshman year to experience new groups of people in new environments by getting involved, Smith was surprised and offended when he was met with hostility disguised as

I get mad over it, they’ll be like ‘Okay, I know what makes him ticked, so I’ll just say it again to get people to start laughing,’” Smith said. “There’s not much anyone can really do about it because it’s not like you can restrict everyone’s freedom of speech ... You can lock certain apps on the iPads, but you can’t lock people’s voice[s].”

When students are getting picked on for things they cannot help, both Minter and Smith stress that there is not much one can do in terms of responding to an insensitive joke or trying to push back against the people who said it.

“I feel horrible. There [are] kids who are walking around our hallways that are having things said to them and directed at them that they can’t really do much other than ... try to laugh it off or just pretend it doesn’t bother them when it’s actually very very hurtful,” Minter said. “I just hate that that is their experience at school.”

Although this is the first large-scale trend the administration has been made aware of, Minter says that there are typically about two incidents a year that are brought to the attention of a dean (now Division Head for Student Success, Safety and Wellness) involving altercations caused by the minimization of a minority group. In cases like these, Minter always likes to ask the kids being victimized if they have talked to a trusted adult. However, he has received strong feedback that most students don’t talk to an adult about how they’re being treated because they don’t want to make a big deal about the situation or possibly make things worse.

“Individually, I think it was my sophomore year, I talked to Dean Taylor because someone had dropped the ‘hard R’ on me,” Smith said. “At first I was scared to talk to a dean about it, but over time it started eating away at me and I became angry. So, I thought it would be a better idea to just talk to a dean ‘cause they’re here to help the students.”

“That being said, I also feel like [for the most part] telling — or ‘snitching’ — wouldn’t help either, except make problems. A lot of people grew up saying ‘Snitches get stitches,’ ‘Snitching: you lose

friends over it’ or all this other stuff ... which is why I also feel like most people who get insulted don’t say anything because of how everyone got the concept of keeping it in and tattle-taling to the adults. That’s why it took me so long to go to Dean Taylor ... because I don’t want to increase the situation any further.”

According to Smith, he learned early on that getting angry and fighting back typically only makes things worse. However, he stresses that this isn’t the case for everybody.

“I fought people before my freshman year,” Smith said. “My freshman year, my temper wasn’t the best, so when people said certain things to me, we would get into altercations, and then security guards or teachers would take us both out of the classroom. So, I worked on it.”

“This year ... my friend ... always comes up to me and is like, ‘Why do these guys keep saying this word in front of me? ... I’m getting so angry,’” Smith said. “I know ... we can talk about it, but it won’t stop everyone from saying it. It just sucks. It just sucks that I went through four years of it and — I wouldn’t say was numbed to it, but I just got used to it ‘cause I know it’s not going to stop, and if I keep fighting it, it’s just going to be a waste of time. So, I just had to set it aside and keep moving.”

Jamieson Elementary School, a Chicago public school located in the inner-city, is ranked in the top 5% in the state for diversity in the student body. According to Assistant Principal Carrie Cole, the school, which contains grades Pre-K through 8, is comprised of about 30 different languages and cultures.

According to Cole and corroborated by schooldigger.com, Jamieson’s student population is about 30% white, 30% Latin, 30% Asian and 10% African-American or other. Currently, Cole says the school is working hard to be racially accommodating as well as accommodating to other minority groups involving sexual orientation or preference. At Jamieson, teachers have stopped lining kids up by boys and girls.

“Just like we wouldn’t have students line up [according to] if they are black or Asian, we are not having students line up according to their sexual identity or preference,” Cole said.

In order to accomplish this, all teachers watched a 30-minute webinar regarding transgender, non-conforming students. The webinar discussed the legal, medical and physical precautions of teaching gender-fluid students.

The webinar also covered what to do if a teacher makes a mistake in terms of misidentifying a student or using the wrong pronoun.

Although Minter says there is no formal training for staff at Prospect, he emphasizes that they react on a case-by-case basis with the respect of the student in mind.

According to Cole, when incidents happen that involve discrimination, all parties are to have a conversation to explain why the situation was insensitive.

It is their school policy to find out on a case-by-case basis if the incident stemmed from anger or hate.

“I feel like it helps to do better once you know better,” Smith said. “Let’s say you burn your hand on a stove ... and you didn’t know better, but now that you know better not to touch that burning stove, you’re going to do better and not touch it again. Once [other students] know, it will help to prevent those things from happening as much — at the least.”