

HOLDING ON

STUDENTS FIGHT BIASES TO RETAIN CULTURAL IDENTITIES

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The bell had rung, the test had been handed out and students were furiously scribbling and bubbling in their answers. Then the crackly loudspeaker roared to life, commanding attention for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Stuck in the middle of her thoughts, junior Neha Rana circled an answer and stood up halfway through the pledge, when she did a double take.

“I stood up in the middle of the pledge, just because I was answering this question and didn’t want to lose my train of thought, and I heard someone call me a terrorist,” Rana said. “That’s not the first time.”

For minority students like Rana, facing such comments is just another part of the classroom environment. Her Indian background has made her a target for racial comments by her peers.

“There are racial slurs that go around...calling Indians a monkey or a gorilla. It sounds bizarre, but it happens, and people treat it as a joke, when it really is not,” Rana said.

These seemingly small encounters can become long-lasting issues. One student, who requested anonymity to share their story, recalls the creation of an offensive Twitter account that still persists online to this day.

“Some person took a photo [of me]...they

Photoshopped it and put it on Twitter [under my name] to mimic a terrorist,” the student said.

Despite numerous efforts to delete it, the account still shows up as the first result on Google Images when the student’s name is searched. For employers, colleges and even strangers, this account is their first impression of the student online.

“To see the first thing that defines you as a person anywhere to the entire world is just that one Twitter account is demeaning. It shows that you can’t rise above that sort of racism. You become defined solely by it and because of that you’re reduced as a person,” the student said. “Emptiness. That’s what I felt.”

Their experience is not uncommon in schools throughout the country. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education saw a 25 percent increase in the number of racial harassment complaints in schools. A 2016 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that more than four in 10 teachers had heard derogatory comments made by students toward minority groups.

“One of the biggest, glaring issues at McLean is the lack of appreciation but also respect for other cultures and ethnicities,” Rana said. “When somebody is trying to express it or trying to be a more avid promoter of their own culture, it’s shot down or made fun of.” ▶

CULTURAL ATTIRE — Senior Havi Carrillo-Klein adorns a tallis to express her Jewish identity. The tallis is a fringed shawl traditionally worn by the Jewish people during prayer. (Photo by Jessie Friedman)

“I’VE HAD A PERSON THROW A PENNY AT ME AND MADE FUN OF ME FOR BEING A CHEAP JEW.”

-SENIOR HAVI CARRILLO-KLEIN

CULTURE CLASH

From the beginning of U.S. history, people of color have been denied opportunities based on their race. Even though laws protecting civil rights were passed in the 1950s and 60s, discrimination continues to this day. Senior Shriansh Singh’s parents were immigrants in the 1980s when they first encountered racism in graduate school.

“There were four Indians on campus and my father was one of them. One of his best friends was actually pelted by stones,” Singh said. “At one point, it got so bad that [my dad] actually had to buy a gun.”

While stone-pelting may seem a relic of ancient times, senior Havi Carrillo-Klein has had a similar experience as a Jewish student at McLean.

“I’ve had a person throw a penny at me and make fun of me for being a cheap Jew,” Carrillo-Klein said.

Whether it be stones or pennies, the impact of the incident far exceeds the pain of the moment. These forms of harassment have served as reminders of the prejudice minorities face. Singh feels that his parents have been victims of other forms of discrimination even in present-day McLean, such as housing discrimination.

“When my parents tried to buy a house in McLean, it was unusually difficult for them,” Singh said. “That was very eye-opening for them.”

These forms of discrimination can take a toll on a person in the long run. When junior Jisolu Awe first moved to McLean at age 5, she confronted racism at a time when the hardest obstacle is usually fighting over the playground swings at recess.

“I had this one best friend and I remember how I wanted to go over to her house for dinner, like, ‘Oh, go tell your dad so we can hang out,’” Awe said. “The next day, she comes back to school and said,

‘My dad doesn’t want me being friends with black people.’ That really stuck with me for a long time.”

Awe also faced taunts about the very thing that defined her to the world—her name. A name that her parents spent countless months crafting to be special had suddenly transformed into an epithet.

“People used to make fun of my name. My full name is 26 letters long, and I used to get roasted for that quite frequently. It made me feel bad,” Awe said. “But one day I was talking to my mom, and she told me what my name means. It means waking up to God. Even though my name’s not stereotypical American, I’m still special.”

By maintaining pride in her name and her culture, Awe is able to dismiss many racial comments and stereotypes directed her way.

“There’s a lot of stereotypes about Africans, but I don’t really let those get to me. I just brush them off,” Awe said.

While Awe navigates the terrain of racial comments with relative ease, many students find it difficult to do so. Throughout his four years of high school, senior Alejandro Galdo has struggled with the stereotypes that accompany being a Hispanic student.

“Always in the back of my mind, there is that thought of what I’m expected to act as or expected to perform as a Hispanic student. I get reactions a lot from my friends, whether it is jokingly or not, like, ‘Oh, you are smart for a Hispanic student,’” Galdo said.

Galdo’s parents were illegal immigrants when they first came to the U.S. They crossed the border a total of three times before finally becoming legal U.S. citizens.

“My mom lived in a small village in Mexico with nine siblings in total, and she grew up without her

father,” Galdo said. “At a certain point, her mom couldn’t provide for all her siblings, so when she was 11, she was sent to live with another family friend in Mexico City without her family there. She didn’t finish high school.”

Because of this background, Galdo finds it difficult to navigate high school as easily as his peers. Every experience is a completely new challenge for families that have never confronted them before.

“My parents didn’t finish their high school education and never got their college education,” Galdo said. “It’s always hard to—as a child of those parents—to really move forward. You face a lot more obstacles because your parents don’t know the process of going through high school.”

However, when compared to conditions back in Mexico, life in the U.S. is relatively idyllic, and Galdo is thankful for the opportunities he has had in this country. But his parents’ immigration story continues to affect his daily life in many ways.

“Growing up in this community, I’m not used to being around too many Hispanic people and I think I have always felt out of touch with that part of my culture,” Galdo said. “My mom cleans houses while my dad works in construction, so that obviously posed some financial troubles for our family. I have always been in the free lunch program. That’s all I have grown up knowing, so it’s not like I know what I am missing out on. It has just made me more aware, and just in general more grateful for what I have.”

Junior Mireya Bowser, a biracial student, has experienced this problem of cultural conflict as a person of black and Mexican heritage.

“[There are] a lot of Mexican stereotypes. I have even heard a few things about how I don’t belong here because I am Mexican and I should go back to Mexico,” Bowser said. “Some people even joke about how I won’t be as successful as anyone that’s white because I am a minority. I do have a bit of self-doubt every once in awhile because of [stereotyping]. I sometimes think I won’t be as successful as some other people.”

Carrillo-Klein, who is also Hispanic, views it as one of her goals to discredit the stereotype that Hispanic individuals are not as well-equipped as their peers and will not be successful in their future.

“I’m really trying to break that stereotype that Latino immigrants are lower class,” Carrillo-Klein said. “It makes me really proud to be Mexican, because I can see the great things that immigrants can do for this country.”

Those who engage in racial stereotyping and comments often misunderstand the difficult experiences that minority students and their families have faced, but Galdo suggests a solution to this issue.

“The more that people try to expose themselves



“[RACISM] IS NO LONGER THAT OPAQUE, CONSPICUOUS THING YOU SEE IN SOCIETY. IT’S MUCH MORE DISCREET AND PERVERSIVE OVER OUR KIDS.”

-SENIOR SHRIANSH SINGH

night right from the beginning,” ESOL teacher Alba Ben-Barka said. “For 27 years, we had an international night. We would have food from all kinds of nationalities, all kinds of countries and we would have entertainment from the different countries. We had 400 to 500 people coming. I feel really sad about it [being discontinued] because it was part of who I am. It’s almost like I have abandoned a little bit of me.”

When Ben-Barka decided to step down as the club sponsor after almost three decades, no students or teachers were willing to take on the responsibility of organizing the event. However, neighboring schools with similar levels of diversity, such as Langley and Thomas Jefferson, do host international nights.

“We tried so many things but we had a difficult time attracting American students...that was always one of the goals that did not have full success,” Ben-Barka said. “What does that tell you? Think about it.”

While some students are currently attempting to bring back international night, in general, students are hesitant to discuss or ask questions about each others’ cultural backgrounds. Because of this, they feel that more could be done on the schoolwide level to promote cultural appreciation and exchange.

“People don’t really take the time to learn about

multiculturalism and I think it’s really important to incorporate that into not only curriculum, but schoolwide programs,” Carrillo-Klein said. “I don’t think that exists as much as it should.”

Efforts have been made on the schoolwide level to promote a more inclusive environment. Literature and movies from other world regions are often included in class discussions and agendas, but even this does not always have the intended effect of broadening students’ world views.

“Last year, during AP World, we watched an Indian movie, and it got so much hate. Everybody was laughing during it. I got really mad at my class. Seeing those people laugh at my culture was just so disrespectful,” Rana said.

In addition, faculty have been trained on cultural sensitivity and appreciation at staff meetings. The new FCPS Superintendent, Scott Brabrand, has made cultural proficiency one of his primary initiatives.

“The crux of the presentation was talking about six guiding principles of cultural proficiency for educators...to not just discuss the concepts but how it could apply to teachers in their daily lives,” said school counselor Brook Dalrymple, who helped lead the training at McLean.

Part of the cultural proficiency training required teachers to confront their implicit biases by associating stereotypical traits with certain races and cultural groups.

“One of the activities that we had teachers do is that we first showed them ‘I am’ and ‘I am not’ statements,” Dalrymple said. “We had an example on the board of ‘I am a tall black man,’ and then you had to fill in the blank for, ‘and I’m not a basketball player,’ is what the implicit bias was.”

Although the intention of this activity was to raise awareness surrounding racial injustice in schools, some members of the faculty believed this method was not the best way to confront the issue.

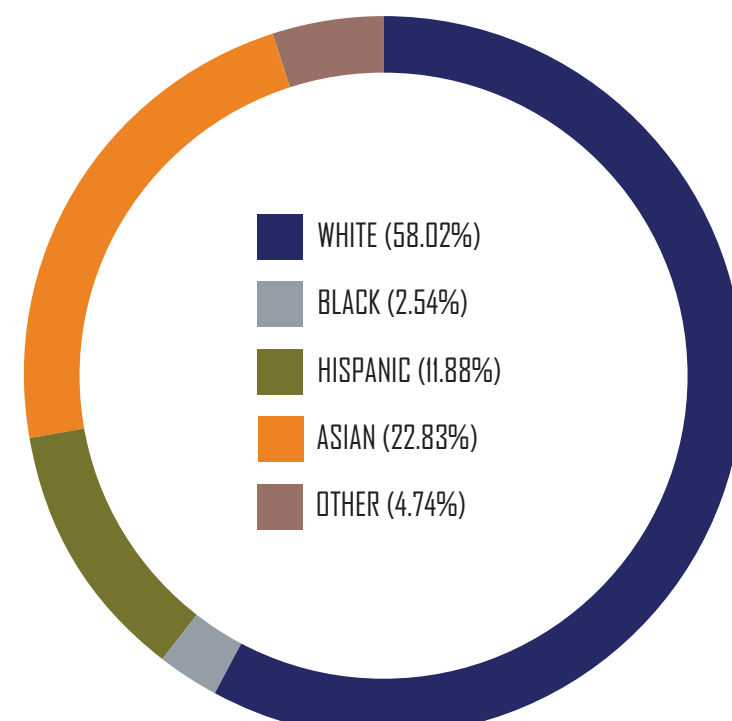
“It was one of those moments where you don’t really know what to say or do, because somebody’s giving you an image and then you’re being asked to say something that you know is offensive,” English teacher Anna Caponetti said. “It seems that the goal of it as a lesson is that you get it right if you correctly identify the stereotype, which is in fact the wrong answer.”

Caponetti believes the administration should have spurred a discussion based on past student experiences with cultural insensitivity.

“I think it would have been good to get testimony from students, particularly students in our schools or graduates who would narrate an instance where they felt that a member of the faculty was culturally insensitive,” Caponetti said.

While the training only addressed issues pertaining to the staff, Dalrymple would like to expand this cultural proficiency training to students.

McLean High School Demographics 2016-17



Information obtained via fcps.edu
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or reach out to these students, the more they’ll see how much they can relate to these students and their stories,” Galdo said.

Antonio Olivo is a reporter for *The Washington Post* who has written articles that explore the changing conditions in the U.S. for immigrants and minorities. He considers the cultural changes happening in schools as a reflection of larger changes throughout the country.

“My goal with immigration is to show what is happening and to give the people I include in an article their dignity as human beings,” Olivo said in an interview with *The Highlander*. “I always hope my articles prompt further discussion. This country is experiencing monumental shifts, both politically and with respect to changing demographics. I’ve always looked at immigration through that lens.”

SCHOOL EFFORTS

Fifty-eight percent of McLean students and 82 percent of FCPS teachers are non-Hispanic white. As a result, fostering diversity at the school has been difficult. One of the principal efforts to create a sense of cultural appreciation was the school’s annual international night, which was discontinued three years ago.

“I established the [International Cultures United] club in 1988 or 1989. We had the multicultural ▶



Junior Jisolu Awe



Junior Wafa Khan



Junior Mireya Bowser

“We want to be student-centered. Getting student feedback would be great to figure out and to hear from them how they feel like it’s like being here as a student,” Dalrymple said.

As role models and leaders, FCPS administrators are trying to convey a supportive message to encourage a safe and comfortable learning environment.

“I believe my role is to provide the conditions under which all of our students can learn in a safe, healthy environment and go on to succeed in life,” school board member at-large Ryan McElveen said. “We must continue to convey the message that our schools are safe spaces, and our school administrators, teachers and even fellow students must do what they can to protect and support these individuals at the ground level.”

AN UNFULFILLED DREAM

Students like Bowser still feel that more can be done to facilitate a conversation about everyday instances in which students may feel alienated due to their race.

“A lot of these issues aren’t really seen because they aren’t talked about,” Bowser said.

Despite the obstacles they face to comfortably expressing their culture in McLean’s environment, students continue to maintain pride in their identities.

“My culture is basically who I am. Everything I do surrounds that. It is who you are, it’s how you grow up. Everything around you is all your culture,” said junior Wafa Khan, the president of the Muslim Student Association. “Without it, you don’t really have a background.”

Rana agrees with Khan, emphasizing the importance of her culture in her everyday life and activities and how it forms an integral part of her personality.

“I feel like every heritage needs to be expressed regardless of where you are [but] a lot of kids are almost afraid to express it,” Rana said. “I express my Indian culture in a multitude of ways. I do Bollywood dance, I volunteer at my local Sikh temple on Sundays and I’m also part of an organization called Sikh Kid to Kid which helps reach out to kids who are being bullied because of their religious beliefs.”

Even a well-respected teacher like Ben-Barka has faced discrimination in the U.S. due to her Italian accent and wishes to challenge the preconceived notions that many people have in regard to minorities.

“When people have an accent, what happens is they get labeled. And people have preconceptions, they have stereotypes,” Ben-Barka said. “When people see me and I open my mouth, that’s all they see—the Italian. They don’t see the American in me. Some people, they don’t even think about these things, but this is my life mission, both in terms of my work and with who I am.”

For Khan, her Muslim-American identity is constantly questioned by others who label her as one or the other.

“I can be a Muslim and be American. I was born here. It is the religion I want to choose, not something that was forced upon me,” Khan said.

While stereotypes permeate all levels of the school community, they are taking on a new figure that is unmistakable to some students.

“Racism takes a much different tone in McLean. It’s no longer that opaque, conspicuous thing you see in society. It’s much more discreet and pervasive over our kids,” Singh said. “We unconsciously are racist to each other. Although that seems extreme nowadays, it’s a fact.” ■

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-JUNIOR WAFI KHAN

JUNIOR NEHA RANA



“EVERY HERITAGE NEEDS TO BE EXPRESSED REGARDLESS OF WHERE YOU ARE.”