Fake Name

Ms. Cameron

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Arlington’s Diasporas

Wakefield High School’s incredible diversity is one of its most thoroughly discussed attributes. When the enormous extent of that diversity is actually reflected upon, however, it is truly staggering. In the hallways of our school, the amalgamation of race is obvious. My friends are white, black, Hispanic, Asian, other. Some would consider themselves ethnically American. However, the sizeable majority of my friends are “from” somewhere else. I have a friend from Serbia, a friend from El Salvador, a friend from the Netherlands; I have a friend from Venezuela, a friend from the Philippines, a friend from Ethiopia; I have a friend from China, a friend from France, a friend from Afghanistan; and I have a friend from Uganda, a friend from Egypt, and a friend from Romania. The diversity of the Wakefield community astounds me time and time again. Only at a school in the DC metropolitan area could one pick up words from seven languages in mere conversation. Unfortunately, this great resource that we have is too often forgotten, and too often taken for granted, so I wanted my project to counter this disappointing reality. Through my project I wanted to acknowledge and celebrate the incredible diversity which we have.

My first objective was one of research. My goal was to gain a strong, but general foundation from which I could go on to study individual cultures more specifically. I knew already many people and their stories and I was familiar with their languages and their cultures, but I lacked a textbook understanding. I did not have any grasp on the role of these entities in the world or in the diversity of the DC region. I lacked the vocabulary and the knowledge necessary to study experiences and cultures academically, and I met this deficit by reading *5 Steps to a 5 AP Human Geography* and *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*. *5 Steps to a 5 AP Human Geography* is a review for students preparing for the AP Exam in Human Geography. Terms were defined and exemplified and I learned about trends in international migration. The book served me as a jumping off point for further research, research into immigration and culture which, for the purposes of my project, were grouped nicely under the term *diaspora*, which “was first used to describe the shared experience of the Jewish people—experience of exile and displacement” from their native Israel to the lands of the Roman empire and beyond (Darity). From there, the term was applied to other large migrations of people. The African Diaspora catalyzed by the Atlantic slave trade is another major historical example. Many diasporas both past and present have had negative initiates; these are called push factors, because they push people to emigrate. They include things like famine, war, job scarcity, disease, discrimination, and overcrowding. Some diasporas, however, are caused by good things happening within countries, these are called pull factors for they pull people to immigrate. They include things like good jobs, low taxes, temperate climates, good schools, lots of space, low crime, and good health care.

In studying diasporas and diasporans (those displaced by a diaspora), I researched their prevalence here in the DC metropolitan area. The number of foreign born people living in the district itself is over 87 thousand, and that does not even take into account all people who would be considered diasporans (“District of Columbia QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau”). A lot of the reading which I did focused on the impact of immigration on entire nations. A prevalent concept which I found in a lot of sources was the human capital theory, which maintains that immigration is a positive force for all parties involved. The host nation receives individuals who are, on average, talented and well-educated and the sending nation receives remittances from their emigrants and a smaller workforce which triggers an increase in wages. The research that I found corresponding to this area indicated the same thing: that on a whole, immigration provides more benefits for the host society than it produces harm. A study done in Maryland at the request of the Maryland General Assembly, for example found that immigrants “are highly complementary to the existing labor force and therefore contribute substantially to the economy” (Commission to Study the Impact of Immigrants in Maryland 12). Another study done at the national level found that foreign-born individuals who, after immigrating, enter the American job force increase competition and raise standards in the US (Giovanni 4). From the standpoint of the research I have seen, as a whole, immigration is not harmful to the interests of the United States.

Discussion of immigration in the United States centers around the potential for damage to the nation. The only thing however, that could truly suffer at the hands of immigration is the culture of those immigrating. There is a lot of debate between proponents of total assimilation, which goes as far as purging native culture, and of ethnic pride, which goes as far as completely rejecting all host culture. Total assimilation strips diasporans of their ties to home and threatens the diversity that, when celebrated, has made our nation great. Excessive ethnic pride however is no better, for it often prevents society from accepting diasporans which can incite many problems. While ethnic enclaves, like Chinatown or Amish villages, are beacons of culture and vibrancy and can serve as great resources for new immigrants, they are also at higher risk when unsavory sentiment ripples through the majority. A promising middle road that many diasporans take is acculturation: “a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group” (ACCULTURATION). Acculturation is a tool that allows people to adopt some practices of their new state, such as going to school, working in the community, or attending a church, without having to sacrifice everything about their culture. *Permanent Culturalism* is the broad term that describes the practice of having a foot in two proverbial camps. Immigrants can hold on to both their old homes and their new homes. In this day and age this has become even easier; keeping a foot in the United States and in one’s home across the Atlantic was quite difficult until the internet brought far flung lands closer together. Internet tools such as Skype are instrumental in the maintenance of contact between immigrants and their families and friends back home. Social networks are instrumental in immigrants connecting with others of their ethnicity in their new homes. The capacity of the internet in conducting research is instrumental in immigrants’ abilities to make informed decisions and set reasonable expectations for their migration. The internet and communications technologies have revolutionized the world of immigration, and many institutions such as Ellis Island have been replaced by those of the internet as harbors for new immigrants (Alonso, Andoni, and Oiarzabal 2).

The purpose of my second and third objectives was to get out and experience the diverse culture of the area that is reflected in our school. I wanted to learn the customs and meet the people and see the artwork of two diasporas: one French speaking and the other Arabic speaking. I chose these cultures because these are the two languages I have learned in school and I wanted to expand my knowledge beyond that of the classroom. I got ahead of myself, however, in the visualization of the objective. I was eager to dive right into exploring and experiencing culture but I should have first considered the difficulty I would have in finding events to attend. About half of my work in these objectives was done in search of culture. I had to make phone calls, send emails, and conduct extensive searches that frequently involved the translation of pages from original French or Arabic. In doing this, I explored the area in much the same way that a new immigrant might. New immigrants typically have family or friends in their new homes, but a major part of the experience is still the pursuit of home culture. In looking for French events, I had little difficulty. The French community is active and vibrant; there were plenty of long-established institutions whose sole purpose was to facilitate the rendezvous I sought. The Alliance Française is one such organization, which I utilized frequently. Dealing with the Arabic speaking community was a far different experience. The community seemed much less organized, on the web, at least. There are plenty of restaurants, but the most authentic ones were typically the most difficult to find, and whereas French events were well advertised and more Americanized, the Arab ones were not. The events themselves were very different as well. The French events were populated more heavily by Americans than by native French speakers. At a traditional French crêpe festival: La Chandeleur, I spent the entire day and met only one family that even spoke French. In stark contrast, the Arabic events were on the whole, populated far more by native speakers. For example I went to the Islamic Center of DC and heard only 2 speakers of English in the entire mosque. Granted, many people were praying which necessitated the use of Arabic, but even so there was far, far less English than at any of the French events. Reflecting upon the differences and taking into account some of the knowledge I had obtained, I could think of a plethora of explanations for the differences which I saw. However, the most founded explanations, in my opinion, are the contrasting perceptions of French and Arab culture and the similarities between American and French culture that Arab culture lacks. In my experience things that are French are considered elegant and classy by a lot of America, and accordingly French events here are catered to that perception. The events I attended were tasteful and formal and the Americans I saw were affluent and some bordered on pretentious. Arab culture is not placed on this pedestal of class, and I feel this is the case because it is so dissimilar that we as Americans do not know what to do with it. It is not to say that people are not intrigued by Arab culture, but they often have difficulty classifying it and have even more difficulty feeling comfortable around the culture. I think that this can account for many of the differences which I noticed.

Experiencing culture was the most meaningful of my objectives. Being around different cultures and languages and traditions is eye opening and exciting. I think that being in situations where one is in a cultural minority is the only way that culture of that specified majority can be truly appreciated. I admit that I felt uncomfortable at times, particularly amidst Arabic culture. At the mosque, I was afraid of the unknown and it took me a long while to work up the nerve to go into the men's prayer area. However, because I continued through discomfort I learned a lot and got to experience culture at a greater depth than that at which most are comfortable.

My fourth objective centered on my participation in Wakefield’s Model United Nations club. I have been a part of the club since my freshman year and I have been the president since Junior year. Our club has weekly discussions on international issues such as global health or immigration and prepares for and attends large collegiate conferences. The purpose of this objective was to gain more experience in international politics, because this is very frequently the catalyzing factor in immigration. At the start of my project I did not know what country I would be representing or upon which committee I would be serving at the Johns Hopkins Model UN Conference which Wakefield attends yearly, but I did know that it was likely that I would be able to be in a committee where I would make a difference (or at least simulate the policy making that would make a difference). For example, should I have had a seat on the Security Council I would have been debating resolutions to the crisis in Syria which has produced a major diaspora of Syrian immigrants. As it turns out I was assigned to the International Criminal Court in the role of a Justice from the Philippines. The case that came before the court was the Prosecutor v Kim Jong-un on counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The facts of the case dealt heavily with the treatment of immigrants to North Korea and emigrants from North Korea, and in our verdict we established precedent, gave further power to the court in international law, and further deterred abuse of power on the part of world leaders. Model UN conferences have always been good experiences for me and this one was no different. The debate is challenging and demanding, but the compromise and resolutions that come out of our mock committees are identical to those that come from the real ones. It is my hope that my future career has a role in immigration, and in my opinion, Model UN is the best preparation that I could have had in high school.

My fifth and final objective was artistic. I wanted to draw on the ideas I encountered and pull from the reactions I had to my experiences to create pieces that were meaningful and honorific. The projects that I took on were ambitious, and as in my 2nd and 3rd objectives forethought was not a defining factor. However, I was able to pull off everything project that planned. The first piece was a reference to the classic *Wizard of Oz*. The idea was to construct ruby red slippers in the styles of numerous cultures and to place them on a yellow brick road. The shoes were difficult to make and I decided to use duct tape to because it was flashy and unconventional. With them I wanted to recognize the diasporic desire of Dorothy in the iconic phrase at the end of the movie: “I just want to go home”. I thought it had special application to my project.

The second piece was by far the most labor intensive. I surveyed every Wakefield student via Warriors’ Period surveys to find out all of the places from which the student body hails and in what quantities. The interpretation of that data was a fun task. As I mentioned earlier, despite my full awareness of the diversity in our school, I am still frequently astounded, and the reading of these surveys was one producer of astonishment. There were many surveys with lists that detailed travels that touched all of the inhabited continents before landing in Arlington. With the data I collected from the surveys I wanted to plot Wakefield students’ homes on a globe. I created a sphere of mini light bulbs in which frequency of light blink corresponds to population of Wakefield students that at some point lived in the part of the world represented by the bulb. My final project for objective 5 was a photographic collage. One of my adventures into French culture took me to an estate in DC that had gardens and decorations from all over the globe, but the cultural elements that I saw struck me as mere decorations, or props to be manipulated by the rich estate owners. This struck a chord with me because I feel that many in the United States enjoy the diversity of the nation and boast of it, but do not really care to truly know it; I feel like as Americans we tend to pull diversity and cultures down off the shelf metaphorically when we want to interact with them and then put them back on the shelf to collect dust when we get bored. I titled this piece *Diasporans Displayed* because it features a diverse group of people frozen like statues and arranged for viewers to see.

This project has meant a lot to me, and I feel that this year, because of my project, I have been much more aware and appreciative of the diversity of Wakefield and the greater metro area community. I learned a lot about immigration and overarching trends in global diasporas, my own culture and those of French and Arabic speakers, cooperation and international policy, and myself as an artist. Though I intended this project to look only at other cultures, in the end I looked just as much at our own. America as a nation when compared to the rest of the world is a beacon of hope and a champion of tolerance for immigrants; however, as a nation we have a lot of room for improvement. In my opinion too much emphasis is placed on Americanization and full assimilation in our society, and too many diasporans are forced to choose between their old and new cultures. This is the 21st century and there are means to maintain permanent culturalism. People can maintain their ethnic heritage without secluding themselves in enclaves, and it is my hope that they are encouraged to do so. My project brought me to a realization of my own opinions and stances on issues of immigration, and this is the only thing I would have done differently in my project. If I could go back and do my project again, I would have provided for an objective that protests current immigration policy and works towards much needed, fair reform. However, I cannot; and I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to learn and proud of the growth I have experienced in my appreciation of diversity.

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