Isabella Hanson Principles Essay

My “Aha” moment came in 2020 when I was home watching the news.

Philadelphia and cities around the world were in turmoil following the killing of George Floyd. The killing of Floyd coupled with the killing of Breonna Taylor hit me hard. Protests were being planned and adults were taking action to speak on the need for equality, but there was not a lot of space for the youth. The isolation of youth during this period was exacerbated by the lockdown. In my time of need, I have turned to poetry, and I knew that the arts could help other students as well. I was 14 years old at the time, but I felt called to provide a positive forum for youth.

The first step was to plan a Juneteenth event. My Juneteenth event was held at the Fussell House - a site that had recently been added to the Federal Network to Freedom. I spent two years assisting with the Federal Network to Freedom application and felt that the site represented hope and healing. The Juneteenth event was both uplifting and inspiring and it left me feeling that I had to do more. Feeling the need to offer broader support for youth, I launched the “I Matter” poetry and art competition. Students in 26 states, and from diverse backgrounds, submitted powerful work on social justice. The top 10 entries were made into a book that I published. The students received copies of the book and prize money that I raised for the project. I saw this as a multi-year program from the start. I am proud to say that in 2021, I opened the contest up internationally hoping for 250 submissions. I was in tears when I saw the submission count reach over 650 entries from 42 states and 30 countries.

The best way to solve the problem of discrimination and the mistreatment of African Americans is to bring the obstacles African Americans face to light. During the time of Civil Rights, the nation did not make meaningful change until the images of the mistreatment of African Americans were broadcasted on television. My “I Matter” poetry and art contest, and Juneteenth events, are geared towards bringing attention to the suffering endured by Black people in America, while also providing a necessary outlet for the youth to express their feelings on this important subject. To solve this problem, we must raise awareness and create opportunities for expression and meaningful dialogue, so that a larger segment of society takes notice and action.

The “I Matter” program has had a meaningful impact on the mental health and wellbeing of youth by providing a platform for them to use poetry and art to express their feelings and experiences on social justice. Specifically, over the past three years, over 1,000 students have been inspired to create work on the topic of social justice. To celebrate the winners and promote their work, the top poems and art were made into a book, and I raised funds to print hundreds of hardcover copies to
donate to schools and libraries to provide a positive resource for educators and students seeking support on the subject of equality. As the hardcover books and PDF copies were distributed to schools and libraries all over the country, it is estimated that over 2,500 people were impacted by the “I Matter” book distribution. Additionally, virtual and in-person speaking engagements were provided for the winning students to share their work in forums such as the “I Matter” annual event, Juneteenth celebrations, UCLA Black History Month celebration and much more. I was both humbled and honored when I was contacted by Nickelodeon and that both myself and several of the winning poets were featured on their television channel. As the segment of “I Matter” poets was featured on both Nickelodeon and CBS multiple times, the impact of this important initiative was felt around the world.

I spoke at a conference recently and I was tasked to develop a poem on the theme of the word *together*. I invited a student from that city who had been a finalist in my contest to join me. Throughout my “I Matter” journey, which I started when I was 14 years old, I have learned the importance of bringing together people from all backgrounds to promote healing in our nation. I have also learned that I cannot do this work alone and, therefore, must work to build partnerships and collaborations. I know that it is my responsibility as an American citizen to work to bring forth positive change and I am fully committed to this work.

There are two examples that I feel demonstrate the impact of the “I Matter” project. First, educators in multiple states have reached out to incorporate the competition into their classroom curriculum for Black History month in February and National Poetry Month in April. The fact that educators see this competition as a resource to open a positive dialogue about racial healing speaks to the impact of this project. Second, “I Matter” has provided a consistent platform for youth to be heard on the topic of social justice. Providing a safe and respectful space for all students to have a creative voice is vital to the future of this country. For three years, the impact of “I Matter” has been felt by youth, parents, educators, librarians, activists, coaches, community leaders, pastors and changemakers throughout the United States and the world.
Isabella Hanson Principles Essay

*E Pluribus Unum* is Latin for “Out of many, one.” It was an unofficial motto of the early United States and stood for the proposition that out of the union of the original thirteen colonies emerged a single nation. While there may have been unity in colonial times, the present United States shows signs of polarization and division. The last election cycle was particularly acrimonious and caused many Americans to take sides. Another cause of division is when one group is treated differently than another. A nation cannot be unified under such circumstances. Only when each American is treated with the same level of respect and dignity can the United States be a unified, cohesive and single nation. Until that day, the ideal of *E Pluribus Unum* will not be achieved.

I designed my “I Matter” poetry contest to give a voice to the youth affected by discrimination and disparate treatment in the United States. It is often said that the first step in solving a problem is recognizing its existence. Through poetry and art, participants in my program have put a spotlight on the injustice that persists in our society. “I Matter” also provides a positive outlet for youth who feel the need to express their concerns. After preparing the book showcasing the poetry and art, I donate it to schools and libraries so others can be exposed to their important work. Today’s youth are the future of our nation, and it is critically important to understand their feelings and views on injustice. This is the first step in identifying solutions that will bring our country to a place of true unity.

My program furthers, and is based on the Civic Virtue of, Equality, which provides that “All individuals have the same claim as human beings to natural rights and treatment under the law.” The “I Matter” program grew out of the unrest following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The facts surrounding their deaths are the epitome of unequal treatment. George Floyd was arrested, and ultimately filled, for allegedly passing a counterfeit $20 bill. Breonna Taylor was killed in her sleep during the execution of a no-knock warrant at a time when the suspect was already in custody. Studies show that each year police in the United States kill approximately 400 unarmed citizens, who are disproportionately minorities. This is not equal treatment as envisioned in the United States’ Bill of Rights. My program brings attention to this inequality with the goal of creating a more fair and equal society.

It is clear that the unarmed victims of police violence are individuals and citizens of the United States. As such, under the Civic Virtue of Equality, they are entitled to the same level of natural rights and respectful treatment as every other individual. When a certain group is targeted for disparate treatment, equality is not
achieved. Youth, like me, recognize that it is unjust for the government to treat some individuals different from others. The views expressed by the youth who participated in my program were very poignant and inspirational. A collection of their work prompted equality in our society.

Providing a forum for the youth to express their feelings about equality furthers an important goal of our society. It promotes identifying areas for improvement and the achievement of equality on a large scale. Because the books are provided to libraries and schools across the country, thousands of people are affected and inspired to take action to bring about a more fair and equal society.

A Founding Principle advanced by my program is Respect, which is “Regard for and defending the equal rights and inherent dignity of all human beings, including oneself.” Similar to Equality, Respect is critical to the free and open society envisioned by the Bill of Rights. The targeting and mistreatment of minorities by law enforcement is the antithesis of Respect. George Floyd and Breonna Taylor certainly were not treated with dignity and instead were denied equal rights. The youth who participated in my I Matter program made it clear that such mistreatment and lack of respect was unacceptable. Their focus on how interactions with the police are different for minorities is important to restore the Respect to which every individual is entitled.

By highlighting feelings about inequality and injustice, my program also provides a forum for developing “regard for and defending” the important principles of equal rights and inherent human dignity. If we are to eradicate injustice, it is important to shine a light on it and propose solutions. My program does just that, with an emphasis on encouraging young people to express their feelings and promote Respect for all Americans.