No child should grow up in fear of being attacked, brutalized, or discriminated against for their cultural identity. Yet, amidst global struggles for racial justice and COVID-19’s disproportionate devastation of minority communities, it is clear that systemic cultural ignorance still pervades far too many of our lives. On a fundamental level, due to a lack of education, many young people remain unaware of the true beauty and diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and lifestyles that populate our world.

The World in Us (TWIU) was founded to fill this gap and protect every child’s inherent and equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness regardless of their cultural background. In this way, TWIU embodies the Founding Principle of Natural Rights, and in particular Equality. Our cultural education initiatives are diverse, ranging from culture camps introducing global cultures to elementary schools through a fun, interactive curriculum to virtual exchange programs for teens to form friendships and discuss international issues with peers from across the world. These programs are all united by their contributions to our organization’s founding belief: that everyone deserves to feel safe practicing, sharing, and celebrating their cultures.

Our programs for younger children, for example, seek to provide youth with what can often be their first exposure to various cultures beyond their own, thereby expanding children’s worldviews at an early age and preventing ignorance from taking root. By addressing ignorance before it can mutate into something more malicious, such as discrimination or hate, we help build a foundational appreciation in the next generation of societal leaders for the equal dignity, rights, and treatment of people of all cultures.

Furthermore, our high school programs help teens, who’ve generally had some previous exposure to cultural diversity, fully humanize diverse cultures through authentic intercultural friendships. For example, one of our students from Bangladesh reflected on how honest discussions with her culture partner — the first Lebanese individual she’d ever met — helped her realize “many of the negative perceptions...about Middle Eastern Countries are just myths.” By helping our participants realize they not only can be accepting of but become lifelong friends with a peer from a completely different culture, lifestyle, and region, we’ve helped hundreds of teens internalize the equality of all individuals and the universality of the human experience.

Justice — both as a Founding Principle and Civic Virtue — also lies at the core of TWIU’s work. As detailed above, our organization is dedicated to combating the immense injustice that is cultural discrimination and promoting the equal rights and treatment of people of all cultures through education. Another Justice-aligned component of our work is our commitment to democratizing access to the life-changing power of cultural exchange and education.

In an increasingly globalized and multicultural planet, cultural awareness is more crucial to social, academic, and professional success than ever. And yet, far too many kids still grow up in communities where they simply aren’t exposed to cultures outside their own and where they aren’t taught the cross-cultural communication skills that are so critical in the 21st century. Furthermore,
many existing cultural exchange programs have extremely high price tags or time commitments that often make the experiences inaccessible to the youth who stand to benefit from them the most.

TWIU meets communities and young people where they are by integrating both in-person and virtual formats, initiatives targeting younger children and teens, and media-based and class-based cultural education programming. Our team works hard to secure grant funding and ensure our programs are completely free for all participants. Thus, we expand access to cultural education for youth of all ages, socioeconomic statuses, and learning styles, especially those that have historically been excluded from such programs. Given how urgent intercultural understanding and collaboration skills are in today’s economy, we believe it is only fair and right that intercultural experiences are accessible to youth from every background.

In addition to Justice, TWIU furthers the Civic Virtues of Respect and Responsibility. We envision a world where everyone is a culturally aware and competent global citizen who knows, cares and takes action about issues across cultural borders. Accordingly, we seek to empower every young person to not only care about but also proactively work to defend the equal rights, dignity, and liberty of all human beings. This goal is perhaps best represented by our multi-week Intercultural Exchange Program (IEP) for teens across the world to learn about and develop solutions to global issues, study a foreign language, and befriend diverse peers.

Specifically, a key aspect of the IEP is weekly workshops and guided discussions about global issues like mental health and LGBTQ+ rights. These conversations are at times uncomfortable or difficult to navigate, especially for participants from countries where such subjects are more stigmatized. Nonetheless, we remain committed to providing a safe, inclusive space for hosting those difficult conversations and opening young people’s minds to respect the equal rights and inherent dignity of people across all differences, not only cultural ones. Moreover, this summer’s IEP will focus on community-building and civic leadership, and we will guide participants in developing local service projects to address the global issues we discuss. Through these projects, we support and mentor youth in taking responsibility to care for the needs and preserve the liberty of individuals in their community.

Ultimately, TWIU seeks to cultivate an appreciation of multiculturalism. This appreciation is foundational to a diverse society, political order, and civic culture that governs every one of its members equally, regardless of culture, race, religion, or other aspects of one’s background. To create this just and inclusive future, we embrace the fact that education is the foundation of any change in society; we believe education is the key to understanding, appreciating, and loving our differences. By making cultural education and awareness the norm for our next generation, we hope to help build a more perfect union, one young person at a time.