

Second Place Junior Essay  
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### Making A Better World

At thirteen years old, the specific meaning of the words, “social justice” was fairly new to me. Growing up, my parents taught me to treat all people with respect and kindness. I remember when I was in elementary school, I learned about slavery, the Holocaust, the treatment of Native Americans, how women did not have the same rights as men, and the list goes on. I just did not understand how these things could happen! I also remember thinking that these horrible and unequal ways of treating people happened so long ago. The world today is a better place. True, social justice leaders fought for what was right even if it meant sacrifice and persecution. They have changed the world for the better but, even though they accomplished a lot, there is so much more to do!

I realize that I have a role to play, even at my age. How could I further the cause of social justice and change the world around me, even in small ways? I believe it has to start with being aware of what is happening and not ignoring it. I need to pay attention and recognize that not everyone is treated fairly and with generosity. When I see someone being mistreated, or facing injustices, I must speak up and challenge the situation even if it is uncomfortable. If I am afraid, I cannot just sit silently. I should ask for help from an adult. Sometimes people get treated poorly because of their gender, race, age, or other part of their identity. Often when this happens, the person does not say anything. They might be afraid or feel the circumstances are hopeless. I cannot just stand by, instead, I need to be a voice for them. Maybe it sounds too simple. However, if we have the chance to help someone, we must.

Furthermore, I can take specific actions in my school and in my community to make safe and welcoming places for everyone. I can start an awareness campaign about an important issue and get as many people involved as possible. It could start with just a few friends and maybe grow to include parents, teachers, and our neighbors. Groups of us could create artwork and messages on posters that are placed throughout our school and other places in our community. Since we spend so much time on social media, we could also spread the positive messages and artwork through Instagram and Snapchat. Messages of this campaign could be about respect, kindness, and making all of us feel included. We could ask people to participate by telling their stories of when they were treated unfairly. Others could share their stories of when they felt accepted and were helped by someone. We could stress how hate has no place in our school and in our community.

In addition to spreading positive messages, I could also give my time to a place that helps people who need it. These agencies assist people and families who have little money, need to find a place to live or a job, or who are being hurt or abused. Many of these places will not let kids my age work there but, there are other ways I can help. I know of a homeless shelter in our area that helps families with children. One of the ways I can help is by gathering items they may need while staying there. I could organize a donation drive for books, toys, clothing, or even iPads and other electronics. I think it would be important to include a note to each child and teenager in the shelter, so they know how much people care about them.

It may not seem like much, but we all can make the world a better place. I do not have to be a person who makes huge changes. I can be someone who speaks up when people are being

mistreated. I can be someone who steps in to help, when others walk away. Are we doing everything we can to be kind, fair, and generous? I can make a difference by remembering what it means to “love thy neighbor.”