

First Place Junior Essay
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The African American Swimmer

History may not always be kind, but among its gifts are great individuals like Martin Luther King, Elie Wiesel, and Anne Frank, whose legacies surpass their years on Earth. Their bold actions brought awareness to people of the past and present about the social and political challenges of their times. Each of them, through their individual life's work and journey, brought systemic change that continues to impact our world - making it a better and more humane place. Such individuals motivate and inspire me to find my own contribution to change the world for the better.

I have a love and a passion for swimming. In 2019 alone, 788 people unfortunately died of drowning. That makes drowning one of the leading causes of accidental death in the world. A report supported by USA swimming found that almost 70% of African American children that were interviewed could not or had a low ability to swim. The situation is even worse internationally with 80% of people of African descent in England not knowing how to swim. According to the CDC, drowning is still the second leading cause of accidental death among African Americans 14 and younger. It is a great misfortune that African American children who are 19 and younger are more than five and half times more likely to die of accidental drowning than their White counterparts.

These statistics are shocking and unacceptable. They are the result of segregation and discrimination that African Americans have endured for at least 400 years. Even though segregation does not legally exist in the US anymore, it is still

present in the majority of our social constructs. Modern segregation is seen in the disparity of income between white and black families. Communities of color tend to be of a lower economic class and have less generational wealth than white communities. Because of this, there may be fewer public amenities such as swimming pools and access to swim lessons. This lack of opportunity has led to African Americans not acquiring essential knowledge about water skills and safety that has continued in other communities for generation after generation. Swim lessons and pool memberships can be expensive, and may cost money that many minority families simply don't have. The denial of effective water education to African Americans is a major social injustice that must be eradicated - ideally by people like me.

When I was young, my parents made the decision to lead me down a different path. They enrolled me in swim lessons at a very young age and I have loved the water ever since. Today, I am a competitive swimmer and I am excelling in the sport. Every day I am reminded that my talent is rare for people of my ethnicity, as I am one of only a few African American swimmers on my team. The lack of representation of African Americans on my team highlights another concern. Some African American students who do not see many swimmers who look like them, get scared and dissuaded, and go to other sports where they see more of an African American presence. I seek to change this drastically. I want African Americans to know that it is admirable to be a part of a minority presence, to break boundaries, and to be the first to try something new. That is why I feel obligated to use my privilege and talent to teach essential water safety skills to young African Americans. By doing so, I will make a difference in my community and I

will help to ensure that future generations of African Americans will have the skills and knowledge to keep themselves safe in the water, and to have the confidence to break stereotypes, ignore what is considered “normal,” and to always excel where there is an opportunity. That is how real, systemic change will occur.

Simone Manuel and Cullen Jones are African American competitive swimmers that have risen to the pinnacle of their sport. They have competed in the Olympics and yes, they have both won multiple Olympic gold medals! Simone Manuel and Cullen Jones have acted as inspirational proof that our past does not have to be our future. Their swim clinics have taught many young African Americans that they can swim and do so competitively. I hope that their presence and my own will inspire children and adults to strive to do great things for the sport of swimming and for our community. In the words of Simone Manuel, *“This medal is not just for me. It’s for all those who came before me... And the people who believe they can’t do it.”*