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Names and faces are ever present in our culture as a way to define a person. Rarely does anyone see anything deeper on a personal level, or try to understand the people and cultures around us. Sometimes, worse comes to worse and even the names and faces are lost under labels. Labels that instead of defining an individual, attempt to define a group as a whole, which is impossible. "A mob's always made up of people, no matter what." (Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, page 157) Every group, every country, every organization is made up of individuals who all lead separate lives, have their own personality, and their own thoughts and feelings. No matter how hard people try to hide the fact through generalizations there aren't 195 countries, but one world and we're all on it together.

Understanding is the key which can build the bridges between people of every race, gender, or faith. If people are taught why there are differences between cultures or beliefs, and not just the differences themselves, it could breach a whole new layer of connection between individuals. When someone tries to understand or sort through the possibilities of why a boy at school is the way he is, it can extend much deeper than the boy just being mean. He could have a rough family life, or lack of social experience. Neither of those are justifications to be spiteful, but they can go a long way in order to help solve the problem on mutual terms and possibly encourage him to change for the better.

This understanding should also branch out to a worldwide perspective. As a child walking through school, I hear many phrases defining ethnicities- definitions that are stereotypes in themselves and should not exist. Especially with the war and hyper activity going on in the middle east, I hear talk of suicidal, turban wearing Arabians. I began to ask the people who spewed such comments whether that was a fair judgment, and if they actually believed that all the people in the middle-east were like that. To my dismay, many said yes. With quick retort I tried to persuade them that they were all people too, not some collective, and that many of the allegedly named suicide bombers had reasons deeper than the thoughts of blowing stuff up. Not to condone the acts of suicide bombers, but even they are people too with reasons for being who they are. Such newfound understanding and respect could go a long way for the US diplomatically as well.

More specifically, in our community, we can also work on bridging the gaps by building understanding. For example, I live in the suburban town of Webster, where life is generally pretty easy going. The majority of the worries I hear about spark from lack of time to do homework, and trips to the mall being delayed. When my fellow suburbanites in school approach the topic of the city I often hear the response- "the city scares me." It's not a place stricken with poverty or hard times to them. It's a scary place where people are murdered and mugged. They don't think about the children that might not eat for a day because their parents didn't have the money, or how other children can't afford to have three televisions in the house to keep them entertained. It's difficult to understand what the lack of food can drive someone to do when the cupboards have two different kinds of cookies to choose from.

However, true understanding cannot be achieved without experiencing what is trying to be understood. To ponder what it would be like to be poor, and then explain to someone in poverty that you understood what they are going through would be insulting at best. So, while reaching out to people and trying to think about what they might be going through is a step forward, you must also understand that you won't always be able to fully understand.

Prejudiced thinking is a general term that can accompany racism, sexism, or a myriad of other bad tasting distinctions between groups of people. It is also ever present in our society. I have experienced it first hand, and not because of my race or my sex, but because of my religion or lack thereof. I'm an atheist, and this has earned me many quizzical looks from those who had

never heard the term before, and to be blunt, many genuinely disgusted looks as well. Despite what I believe in, I too am a person and I do have feelings beneath my name and face, and it doesn't feel good to be regarded as scum or here the words- "You're going to hell." During one of my free blocks several kids were having a discussion about how many times they attended church. Eventually the conversation circulated to me and they asked me how many times I'd been, and I replied "never, I'm an atheist." This evoked much conversation into the nature of atheism, but one phrase stood out among the rest to me, the words that I'd seen on several people's faces, but never heard aloud. "That's disgusting." It didn't bother me so much as an insult, I had developed a thick skin against those, but the thought that he'd outright condemn me because of what I believed in was nauseating. The realization that such extreme prejudice thinking existed was painful, and ever since I've tried to get to know people personally before judging them.

There are several things we could do to help further this cause in creating an understanding. An equal opportunity community group or organization would be a great start. From there we could plan festivals that bring together many cultures, and come up with creative ways to bring the news and stories to the people. The more people, the more ethnicities, the more religions, anyone that can pitch in will all have a say in telling their side of the story and putting in ideas of their own. Another possible idea would be to have another essay contest called "A Day in the Life..." Where people could tell their stories from their shoes and let other people know that they are not just a name and a face.

Eventually it boils down to the fact that every human being is in this together, and we should do our best to reach out to each other. Listen to what one another is saying. Look into what each other is under the names and faces. Know that we are all different, yet all the same.