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State: Utah

When my family and I relocated to Utah from India six years ago, we were fortunate to find a community that has welcomed us with open arms and that values diversity. Four years later, I stepped into West High School, the most diverse school in Utah, on my first day of my freshman year. I realized that my personal experience was more an exception than the norm. Inequities in educational opportunities and injustices in the United States' criminal and juvenile justice systems disproportionately affect minority groups in Utah. My observations at my high school sparked what drives me: social justice advocacy.

In my past two years at West High, I have been an active member of the school's debate, Model United Nations, and Ethics Bowl teams. These clubs have given me the opportunity to actively research, write, discuss, debate and negotiate on issues related to social justice and politics and motivated me to evolve from a mere proponent of social justice to one who takes action.

After extensively researching the 2020-21 Policy Debate topic, which surrounded criminal justice reform, I learned about the injustices in our criminal justice and juvenile justice systems. I decided to take action by volunteering with the Salt Lake Peer Court, a restorative alternative to the juvenile justice system that aims to combat the school-to-prison pipeline, a phenomenon of high rates of recidivism among students who are punished in schools. This exposed me to the experiences of minorities in the Juvenile Justice System. Interactions like the ones Peer Court has offered me allows us to humanize those who have historically been dehumanized.

Perhaps the most meaningful project I have worked with is the Mundi Project, which aims to break down socioeconomic barriers through music education. I have volunteered as a piano teacher for the Mundi Project's free Harmony Hub music lessons for children, teenagers, and adults for over four years. The free music education has brought music to many communities that would otherwise not have access to it. Our music lessons attract people of many different socio-economic statuses, races and ethnicities, and genders, creating a diverse and accepting learning community. My weekly interactions with my students not only drives me to be a better teacher and learner, but has also taught me the importance of diversity and inclusion from a young age, driving my passion for social justice.

My peers and I have been shocked by the blatant violations of human rights and rampant discrimination in the United States. More importantly, we have been shocked by the sheer number of people who seem to support these injustices, inequalities, and inequities. Throughout my journey in social justice advocacy, however, I have learned that "being shocked" is simply not enough to produce meaningful change - it is finally my generation's "turn behind the wheel" to take action on issues that we care about. This scholarship will allow me to further my education in social justice and continue to advocate for true justice for all people, regardless of demographics.