

On Diversity and Engineering

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On February 17, 2007, I stepped out onto Duke University's West Campus, armed with my Canon Digital Rebel XTi camera and a few ideas about what sort of photos I wanted to take. My assignment: capture a picture representing five different women at Duke. The reward: on the surface, winning a campus-wide contest revolving around diversity for the Women's Center; but more importantly to me, gaining a new perspective about my role in understanding and contributing to that diversity. It turned out that despite their varied backgrounds, the ladies I was privileged to work with were all from my dorm on campus. I had sent out an email and they were the first self-assembled group to respond; they were Asian, African American, Caucasian, Indian, and Puerto Rican. Looking back now at myself meeting them in the quad courtyard, memories of what led up to this event flood my mind.

A still-crisp snap shot from first grade at E. K. Powe Elementary School in Durham, North Carolina, rushes to mind. I was arguing with my African American classmate Penny about who was "better," white or black kids. I look back in shame, but in those days I was young and had a hard time understanding the differences and similarities between myself and the friends I had. I did not get much of an opportunity to learn, however, as in second grade I moved up north to Saint Paul, Minnesota, which like me is predominantly Scandinavian-Caucasian in makeup. I journeyed through my primary education with the naive assumption that everyone was like me.

The assumption ended with my graduation from high school. My first choice undergraduate institution ended up being Duke University, which brought me literally within blocks of the school where I had that unfortunate debacle with Penny. Coming back to the South and to an international university shoved me back into the sphere of diversity and forced me to confront my relative prejudices. Part of this confrontation occurred in my friendship with Kaywe, a black student who has been in my Bible study since freshman year. Before Kaywe, I had only had one or two close friends who were non-white, and I believe that constrained me in many ways, including academically as I was secluded from alternate and important perspectives from my own. My friendship with Kaywe has played a significant part not only in helping me appreciate and embrace

diversity, but also teaching me to see through a person's appearance to what truly composes their essence.

A trend in my life is that I grow and stretch the most as I physically move to a new location. My first two years at Duke actually led me away in the fall of my junior year to study in London for a semester. Away from the familiar customs of my home, I once again confronted new cultures and contexts. I dealt with tension as I navigated markets dominated mostly by Middle-Eastern and Indian peoples and for once experienced the feeling of being a true outsider. One case flashes across my mind, in which I was bartering with a Pakistani man over the price of some goods and he called me out as being a foreigner who had no concept of what it was like to be in his situation. The incident ended as I threatened to walk away and the vendor offered a better price, which I took to make peace. I came back to the United States at the end of the semester feeling caught between the ongoing stresses between cultures and acutely aware of the need to understand these divides.

But what could I, a white male mechanical engineering student with a passion for the arts, do to make a difference? I was aware of my capacity to use these attributes in positive ways from my limited experience tutoring an Afghan family in down-town Minneapolis late in high school, and also the unique ability I had through the lens to cross language barriers with visual word pictures. Still the idea of contributing meaningfully and fully understanding diversity was far-off, and I longed for another chance.

The opportunity came early in the semester through an article in the school newspaper on February 1st, 2007, advertising the contest to capture the image of Duke Women. I knew that whether I won or not, the contest would be a way for me to clarify to myself all I had gathered about diversity throughout my education, and then to communicate that to others in a meaningful way. I worked hard to frame my thoughts and feelings cohesively around the makeup of the five women in my picture, and ended with a portrait-oriented design of the five emerging from an archway on campus, symbolizing the overarching banner of diversity covering the campus and my personal progress forward in understanding it.

Real forward motion keeps going past momentous times, and that is certainly true for me. The summer after taking the photograph, I returned home to Minnesota to

intern with the international company Boston Scientific, where I was privileged to work with a diverse spectrum of engineers from a variety of backgrounds. This year as a senior I chose to return to the same dorm once more instead of moving off campus as many seniors do, and have lived out my vision of interacting with not just seniors but also underclassmen to be a resource of advice and encouragement. Looking ahead, I see myself at Stanford University, which is composed of a great mix of peoples and cultures. Further along, I imagine using the engineering degree I earn to teach a new generation of students and continue volunteering like I did with the Afghan students in high school. And once more, a reflection to last semester reminds me of the joy I have to know that my photograph won the Women's Center competition, and will be indefinitely on display in the freshmen campus library to remind incoming students like I once was of the importance of diversity.