

Speak Now!: A Look at Diversity at MTSU

by

Beatriz Marie R. Dedicatoria

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College.

Fall 2019

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To the people who shared their stories *fearlessly* and to the rest of the world who
just need that *little push* to share theirs and speak their truth, this is for *you*.

Acknowledgements

Ma and Dad, thank you for supporting me from the very beginning of this journey. You both offered such good ideas and pieces of advice, listened to my stories and problems, heard me vent on multiple occasions, fed me when I was *hangry*, and believed in me. *Sobrang mahal ko kayo*.

To the MTSU students and professors who participated, thank you for speaking up and entrusting me to tell your stories. For letting me capture a specific moment in time of yourselves, thank you.

To Sergio Villa, Ivy Tran, Jada Stewart, and Martina Hoffmann, talented artists I found via Instagram, thank you for letting me share your artworks with the rest of the world. We might not know each other very well, yet you all gave me powerful words of encouragement regarding my project. Thank you all for that.

Dr. Rebecca King, your immense and continuous support for this project did not go unnoticed. Thank you for your kind words and guidance. I could not have asked for a better person to present my thesis to.

Dr. Poushali Bhadury, or Dr. B, thank you for agreeing to be my thesis advisor (even though you did not really know me at the time), spending your time mentoring me and offering your ideas to the project, for praising my efforts but at the same time challenging me so that I may learn to defend my beliefs, and for believing in me and this project. I believe in this project with all my heart, but it was only after you talked about this project's impact on you and maybe the rest of the people who will get to see this that I realized its true value and potential to make a change. For all of these, thank you so so much. It has been one heck of a ride.

Abstract

Speak Now!: A Look at Diversity at MTSU is a creative project in the form of a magazine called *Speak Now!*. It was greatly inspired by my own diversity experiences, the Me Too movement, coming-out stories of people, and the fight for equality. The goal of this project is to celebrate diversity at MTSU in such a way that could potentially inspire people to take action and push the movement for better publicity of diversity at MTSU forward. The first issue of the magazine features articles, interviews, and visuals highlighting the several areas of diversity among students and professors at MTSU. In its future publications, this magazine will remain true to its title and consistently embody the notion of speaking out, being honest and brave, going bare, and telling the truth.

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Introduction

As an English major and a storyteller, I feel the need to recount a significant event earlier in my life that will later on inspire this creative project. It was my junior year in high school. I remember sitting in my Early American History class and looking around the classroom in silent awe. I was a shy kid back then. Granted, most high school teachers get creative when it comes to decorating their classroom, but the one I was in was different. The walls were not covered with frilly and fancy decorations, colored papers cut in different shapes, words telling the students they did a good job, and a collection of students' works, just like my other teachers' classrooms. No, his walls were splashed with movie posters; pictures of important figures in history; a copy of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Amendments; and quotes from artists who are long dead now, to name a few. One quote in particular, from a man named George Orwell, stopped me from admiring the rest of the classroom. It said, "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act." From then on, it became my habit to walk in the classroom, sit in my usual spot, and look and ponder about the quote for the first few minutes of class. And, of course, from then on, I promised myself to always tell the truth even when the rest of the world is telling me otherwise.

In today's world where fake news and lies circle the media and everywhere we go, telling the truth and saying what is on our minds are slowly starting to become things of the past. Something that people nowadays, from what I have witnessed, try to avoid for fear of being labeled as an outcast. Last time I checked, I was in the United States of America, a great country where people have the freedom of speech, the right to practice any religion they want to, and to do whatever they wish for the pursuit of their happiness

as long as it is not causing anyone harm. So, why are we going back? Why are we focusing on the less important things? Why are we letting other people control what we say or do? Most importantly, why are we not taking advantage of the freedom that we have in this country? If these are still not enough reasons, well, I know that in several countries in this world, such as my country, the Philippines, people would absolutely kill to have the freedom Americans do.

Having the freedom of speech is great, but it is also important to remember that all good things come with a price. As an immigrant and a person of color, I have been a victim of hate speech on campus. It was the second semester of my freshman year of college and one of my classmates said these words to me in front of the whole class to hear: “I hope you get deported.” Was I upset? Yes. Was I hurt? More than much. But does he have a right to say what he just said, no matter how awful and degrading it is? Absolutely. Why? Because this is America and according to the First Amendment, what people have to say matters, and is therefore protected by the law.

One of the main driving forces that compelled me to attend MTSU was its diversity. *Diversity*, in this context, is defined as “differences along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies, and more” (Volckmann). Current students and alumni that I know have talked to me about how diverse MTSU is. I have also read reviews online about MTSU and a common thread among these reviews is the topic of diversity. In fact, some students I met briefly during Customs, MTSU’s version of college orientation, told me that diversity is one of their top reasons for choosing MTSU out of all the other colleges. For me, however, seeing is still believing. On my

first day as a freshman at MTSU, I was blown away by how diverse the students are. I saw people of different races, backgrounds, cultures, ages, and religions gathered together to study, learn their craft, and fulfill their dreams. I have never seen something so beautiful and inspirational. Unfortunately, diversity among students is where the diversity on campus ends. What I failed to see in my three years here and what MTSU lacks is diversity in other areas, such as diversity among professors and the courses offered at MTSU, and support for diversity-related programs and events.

Regarding diversity, MTSU has a nondiscrimination policy, which states:

MTSU will promote equal opportunity for all persons without regard to race, color, religion, creed, ethnic or national origin, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, age (as applicable), status as a protected veteran, genetic information, and any other legally protected class. In doing so, MTSU affirms that it will not tolerate discrimination against any employee or applicant for employment and will not subject any student to discrimination or harassment under any educational program and no student shall be discriminatorily excluded from participation nor denied the benefits of any educational program on the basis of any of the protected categories listed above. (“25 Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Nondiscrimination”)

While MTSU has a nondiscrimination policy, the numbers from the 2018 MTSU Factbook, a document published annually to provide comprehensive information and easy access to the most frequently requested information about the university, seem to tell us otherwise. That is not to say that MTSU is not abiding by its nondiscrimination policy.

Perhaps it just shows the need for improvement and a better call to action in terms of diversity across all areas among MTSU faculty and staff. Below is a table of the information I gathered from the 2018 MTSU Factbook about the racial diversity among the faculty and staff at MTSU:

Table 1. Diversity Profile of MTSU Faculty and Staff from MTSU 2018 Fact Book (23)

Faculty and Staff				
	Total (Full-time and Part-time)			
	Male		Female	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
White	523	79.6 %	519	79.5%
Black or African American	39	5.9 %	56	8.6%
Hispanic	22	3.3%	12	1.8%
Asian	40	6.1%	37	5.7%
American Indian	1	0.2%	1	0.2%
Two or More Races	4	0.6%	4	0.6%
Not Specified	28	4.3%	24	3.7%
Total	657	100.0%	653	100.0%

The same pattern follows the other staff positions here at MTSU, such as the professional/non-faculty staff (“Faculty and Staff”). Below is another table of information from the 2018 MTSU Factbook regarding the racial diversity among the professional/non-faculty staff at MTSU.

Table 2. Diversity Profile of MTSU Professional and Non-Faculty from MTSU 2018 Fact Book (23)

Professional/Non-Faculty				
	Total (Full-time and Part-time)			
	Male		Female	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
White	248	86.1%	327	84.9%
Black or African American	26	9.0%	44	11.4%
Hispanic	6	2.1%	3	0.8%
Asian	4	1.4%	5	1.3%
American Indian	1	0.3%	0	0.0%
Alaskan Native	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Two or More Races	3	1.0%	4	1.0%
Not Specified	0	0.0%	2	0.5%
Total	288	100.0%	385	100.0%

This clearly shows that while diversity among students is great, MTSU lacks racial diversity among its faculty and staff.

From my years at MTSU, it has come to my attention that MTSU's curriculum is not diverse enough. For instance, most of my film classes only talk about the film industry here in America. While I do understand the purpose of this as many of us will end up working in this country, I would still like to learn the film industries of other countries. It is the same with the Department of English. As an English major, I am required to take both British and American Literature classes, while World Literature classes, if there is any at all, are only offered as an elective. Having a varied curriculum is not just so students could have more options; it gives way for a more unique and diversified way of thinking as well. In fact, more and more colleges and universities across the United States are beginning to diversify their curricula since college leaders are quickly realizing that knowledge about domestic and international diversity is essential for the present-day students (Otten 12). Having a diverse student body alone is not enough to promote diversity at MTSU. According to Matthias Otten, Professor of Political Sciences and Intercultural Education at the University of Cologne, students do not learn about other cultures by merely interacting with other students. He claims that "intercultural learning needs reflection of individual and collective social experiences with people from other cultures rather than contact as such" (15). Similarly, Frans van Vught, a Dutch social scientist and Professor of Higher Education Policy at the University of Twente, states that:

A more diversified system is assumed to be better able to offer access to higher education to students with different educational backgrounds and

with a variety of histories of academic achievements. The argument is that in a diversified system, in which the performance of higher education institutions varies, each student is offered an opportunity to work and compete with students of similar background. Each student has the opportunity to find an educational environment in which chances for success are realistic.

In other words, having a diverse curriculum and system will not just benefit the students during their time at MTSU but also greatly aid them in their future endeavors out in the real world, which justifies the need for a more diverse curriculum.

In order to combat some of the diversity-related issues on campus, MTSU created the Intercultural & Diversity Affairs and assembled a team of talented and amazing people. Just like how MTSU has a Veteran and Military Family Center that caters to the needs of veterans and families of veterans, MTSU saw the need to create a center dedicated to the diverse group of students here at MTSU. Ever since its formation, they have created several programs, such as Heritage Month Awareness Programs, Intercultural Graduation, LGBTQ+ Issues, and others in order to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for everyone at MTSU. There has also been an increase in the presence of ethnic clubs and organizations on campus, such as La Comunidad, Asian Student Association, Caribbean Student Association, and others. These multicultural organizations host cultural events every semester and although these events are usually successful, they are only successful within their scale, a small scale, to be exact. These events do not get advertised enough or given the attention and space they deserve by the university. As one of the universities known for its great diversity, MTSU needs to do

more, especially when it comes to promoting or advertising these events. Therefore, for this project, I would like to focus on emphasizing the diversity on campus by creating a magazine that will highlight what MTSU has done so far to promote diversity as well as highlight other areas that need improvement.

Besides watching Asian dramas, I grew up reading books, magazines, newspapers; listening to the daily love advice and oldies on the radio; and writing, even if it was just in the form of taking notes from textbooks. With all of these in mind, I created a magazine from scratch for this creative project. The magazine is called *Speak Now!* which was greatly inspired by own diversity experiences; the Me Too movement, a movement founded in in 2006 “to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing;” coming-out stories of people; and the fight for equality (“History and Vision”).

The magazine consists of 48 pages and most, if not all, of its contents were produced by me. Any contents I do not own are clearly disclosed and properly credited in the magazine and were obtained with permission from the original owners. The magazine contains a cover and a back cover, table of contents page, editor’s letter page, contributors’ space page, overview of diversity at MTSU page, feature section comprising of photos and articles of a selected number of students and professors at MTSU, a travel page, an advertisement page highlighting a student-run podcast, and several pages of artworks and photographs from various artists.

The projected audience of *Speak Now!* magazine are the students (both current and alumni) and their families, faculty and staff, and visitors of MTSU in the hopes that it

will educate them of the diversity at MTSU. Additionally, the goal of this project is to celebrate diversity at MTSU in such a way that could potentially inspire people to take action and push the movement for better publicity of diversity at MTSU forward.

Approach/Methods

As both an English and Video and Film Production major and the current Editor in Chief of *Collage* at MTSU, I was able to put what I have learned in my classes into practice. I have always been a hands-on learner so creating a magazine from scratch is something that I truly enjoyed. From the planning stages to designing the magazine, writing the contents, and taking the pictures for it myself—these experiences did not only teach me about my topic, but also a lot about myself. As an immigrant and a person of color, the topic of diversity is something that I hold close to my heart. Especially in today's world where equality regardless of race, gender, status, skin color, and others is still a huge problem in some countries, this project taught me more of something that I value whilst getting the chance to be creative. A project that, I hope, will help me educate other people about diversity in the future.

Having been an avid reader of magazines ever since I was young and a part of *Collage* at MTSU for three semesters now, I have a fair knowledge of what goes into creating a magazine from scratch. For this creative project, with permission from the participants, I used my phone as a recorder while interviewing them. Later on, I transcribed these interviews and used it as a guide to write the articles. I obtained some of the visuals in the magazine from artists I found on Instagram. Some are MTSU students, while some are not. I messaged all of them, explained what my project is about, and asked for permission to use their work. Luckily, all of them said yes. For the whole magazine, I used several software programs from Adobe. I used my own DSLR camera, Canon Rebel T7i, to take the necessary pictures for the magazine and Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop to edit the pictures. For the written components of my creative project, I

used Microsoft Word. Once I completed and edited the visual and written aspects of my project, I used Adobe InDesign to place everything together and create the finished look of the magazine. The next step after I defend my thesis is to send a pdf version of the magazine to Mixam, a printing company I chose after much research. I will have at least thirty copies printed to be distributed to the Honors Committee and later on, to my advisor, family, friends, and the participants of *Speak Now!*

With regards to how everything came together for the creative project, I used resources from MTSU that is readily available to me, such as the library, my professors, my colleagues, and the equipment checkout services offered by the College of Media and Entertainment. For the resources not available on campus, such as the Adobe software package and the printing of the magazine, I paid for these out of pocket.

Design

I used Adobe InDesign to create the magazine. With regards to the design of *Speak Now!* magazine, I spent months and months browsing through various magazines and Pinterest for ideas. I knew I wanted to use bold colors to represent what the magazine is about, which is speaking up, telling the truth, and being brave. I ended up using a color very similar to wine red as the main color and a touch of light pink throughout the magazine to balance the intensity of the wine-red color. The cover page was designed by a student artist, Ivy Tran. I commissioned her to illustrate me, the creator, for the very first issue of the magazine. As for the layout, I wanted it to be simple yet artistic so readers could focus more on the visuals and stories. I was able to accomplish this by using lines, boxes, and circles to highlight important things.

Conclusion

Working on this project has been extremely interesting and entertaining to say the least. I have met so many amazing and talented people and learned so much about them, the diversity on campus, and myself. The whole project took about seven months. While the magazine is good to go for printing, I decided to wait until after the semester ends in case I needed to change something. Printing matters aside, I could not be happier to finally see my project come to life.

One of the things that my advisor, Dr. B., asked me to do during the duration of the project was to keep a journal. She told me to record everything—what I did, what went well, what went wrong, what I could have done better, and so on. It was absolutely hard to maintain it, but I pushed through and I am glad I did because looking at it now, it serves as a reminder of the whole process and how far the project and I have gone. Some of the things that went well were the interviews, photoshoots, and gathering of visuals. With the interviews, even though I basically asked all of them the same questions, each participant had a different answer, a different story to tell, and I think that that is the strength of each article. They all had interesting and incredibly eye-opening stories and it made me realize how much I do not know about life. Additionally, interviewing them gave me the feeling that I was doing the right thing. Regarding the photoshoots, which I did after I interviewed each participant, I was surprised at how well it went. I initially thought that my participants would be shy in front of the camera, but each one of them actually owned it. Although I felt a little uneasy about telling the professors how to pose, all of them enjoyed it and the photographs are here to show. I would also say that the gathering of the visuals was successful. Finding the artists was hard, but after I shared

with them what my project was about, they were all willing to let me use their artworks. All these successes made putting the magazine together easy.

As a planner, I had everything planned from the very beginning to the very end. What I did not plan for, however, was what could go wrong. There were a lot of things that went well with the creation of the magazine, but there were also several setbacks. Some of these include designing issues, communication issues, scheduling issues, technical difficulties, and staying on top of things. As fun as it sounds, designing a magazine was a struggle and at times, frustrating. I had limited knowledge of Adobe InDesign, so I had to constantly watch tutorials just to know how to do something. That took a huge amount of time, but it was also a good learning experience. When it comes to communication, there were times when a participant would not respond to my emails, so I had to wait and eventually find a new person, which then brings me to scheduling issues. I understand that things happen, and people need to reschedule, but in my case, especially since this is a time-sensitive project, it pushed me back and the project. I ended up working on some other aspects of the magazine while waiting for the schedules of my interviewees to clear up. I also had problems with the equipment I used. For instance, I forgot to double check the recording from the handheld recorder I borrowed from the Department of Media Arts after an interview. It turns out that the recorder did not pick up any audio, so I had to reschedule with the participant and redo the interview. Lastly, I had a hard time staying on top of things. I am usually a very disciplined person, but since I had to work on this project over the summer to finish it on time, I had some difficulty. I got caught up doing other things and I studied abroad as well so I went a month not working on the project and that pushed me back once more. When I got back from my

study abroad trip, I immediately had to force myself to spare some time to work on the magazine. There were several times when I felt like giving up, but I forced myself to look at the bigger picture, to remember who I am doing this for, and that helped immensely. It took every ounce of my being to fight distractions and moments of procrastinations, but I got it done.

All in all, I have enjoyed working on this project. Not only did I learn a lot from the people I interviewed, but I also learned a lot about myself and the diversity culture at MTSU. I am honored to have been given the chance to work on this and I would not trade this experience for anything else. I would like to conclude by saying that if these stories were able to change the way my advisor, Dr. B, and I see things, then what more can it do to the rest of the people at MTSU?

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Important Documents Regarding IRB

Re: IRB Inquiry - Inbox

Message

Delete Archive Reply Reply All Forward Attachment Switch Background Move Junk Rules Read/Unread Categorize Follow Up Send to OneNote

Re: IRB Inquiry

Aleka Blackwell
Wednesday, April 3, 2019 at 14:25
Beatriz Marie Dedicataria
[Show Details](#)

You replied to this message on 4/5/19, 13:46. [Show Reply](#)
You forwarded this message on 4/5/19, 13:47. [Show Forward](#)

From: Aleka Blackwell <Aleka.Blackwell@mtsu.edu>
Date: Tuesday, April 2, 2019 at 16:06
To: Beatriz Marie Dedicataria <br33g@mtmail.mtsu.edu>
Subject: Re: IRB Inquiry

Hello Bea,

Sorry for the delay in getting back in touch with you. Your project does not need an IRB review of any kind. It is not a research project. It's a creative project rather than a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. The OHRP gives that definition when we make decisions about projects, and I don't see yours as a project that fits that definition. Would you agree?

Dr. Blackwell

From: Beatriz Marie Dedicataria <br33g@mtmail.mtsu.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, March 13, 2019 3:43 PM
To: Aleka Blackwell
Subject: IRB Inquiry

Hi Dr. Blackwell,

I hope you're doing well. My name is Beatriz Dedicataria and I was in your Modern English Grammar and Usage online class last spring. I was looking at the IRB website for my creative thesis project for the Honors College and saw that you're one of the members so I decided to email you a question. My creative project will take the form of a magazine and I will be interviewing and taking the pictures of people (students, professors, etc.) from MTSU. My question is, will I have to go through the whole IRB process or can I just fill out the exempt form?

I've attached a copy of my thesis proposal for you to view. I've also done my CITI training my sophomore year, if that helps.

Thank you in advance and have a great day!

Re: IRB Inquiry - Inbox

Message

Delete Archive Reply Reply All Forward Attachment Switch Background Move Junk Rules Read/Unread Categorize Follow Up Send to OneNote

Re: IRB Inquiry

Aleka Blackwell
Wednesday, April 3, 2019 at 14:25
Beatriz Marie Dedicataria
[Show Details](#)

You replied to this message on 4/5/19, 13:46. [Show Reply](#)
You forwarded this message on 4/5/19, 13:47. [Show Forward](#)

Hi Bea,

Since you are not collecting data for analysis from them, you would ask them orally for permission (as would a journalist) for whatever information you decide to collect from them. You should find out what information they are comfortable having included in your project, and whether and how they would like to be cited or acknowledged for their contributions.

Think of this as a journalism project.

Makes sense?

AB

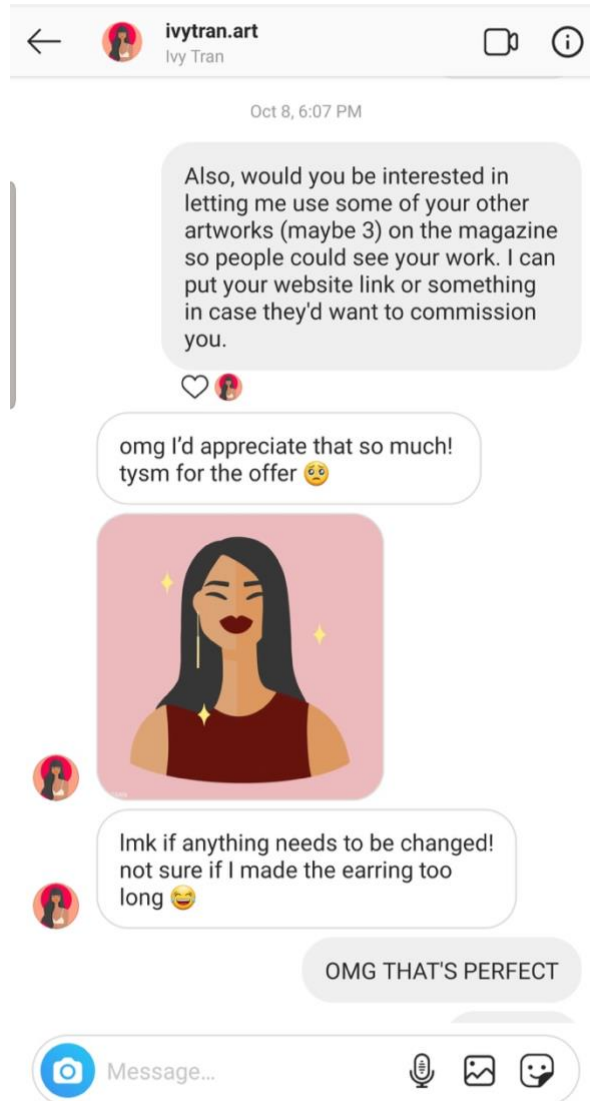
From: Beatriz Marie Dedicataria <br33g@mtmail.mtsu.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, April 3, 2019 2:12 PM
To: Aleka Blackwell
Subject: Re: IRB Inquiry

Hello Dr. Blackwell,

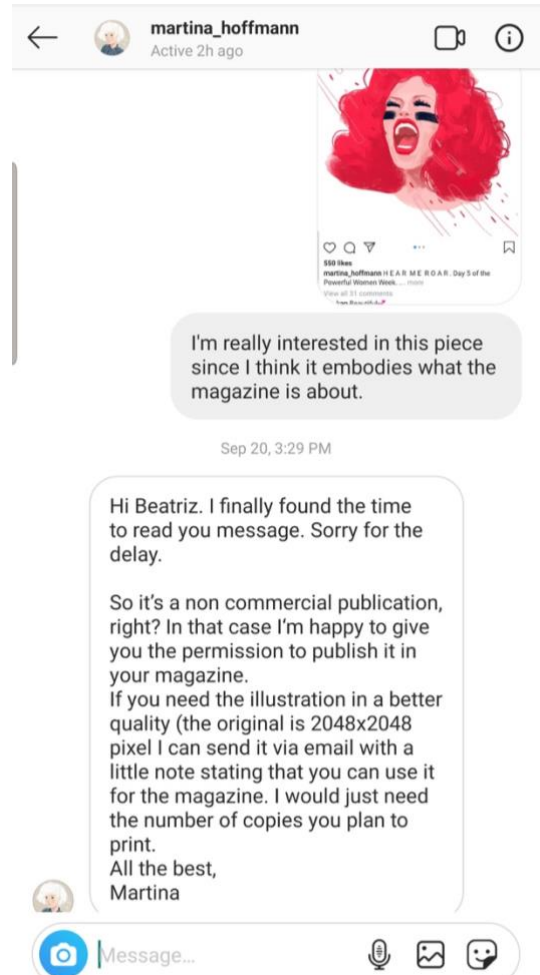
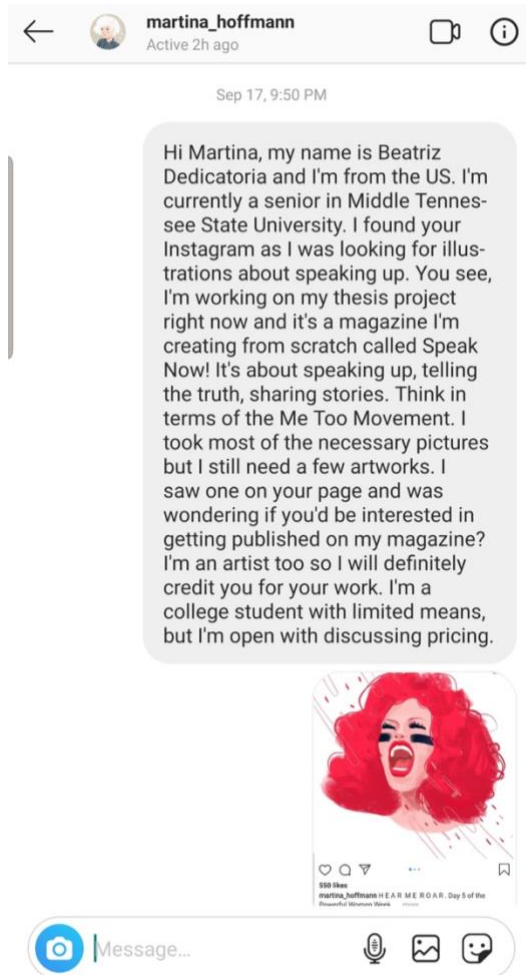
Thank you so much for taking the time to review my proposal. It's good to know that I don't have to go through the IRB process and yes ma'am, you're right about my project being a creative one. Since my project does not need an IRB review, does that mean that I'll just have to ask the interviewees to sign a consent form?

Beatriz Marie R. Dedicataria
Middle Tennessee State University, '20
English and Video/Film Production Major
Literature Editor, *Collage*

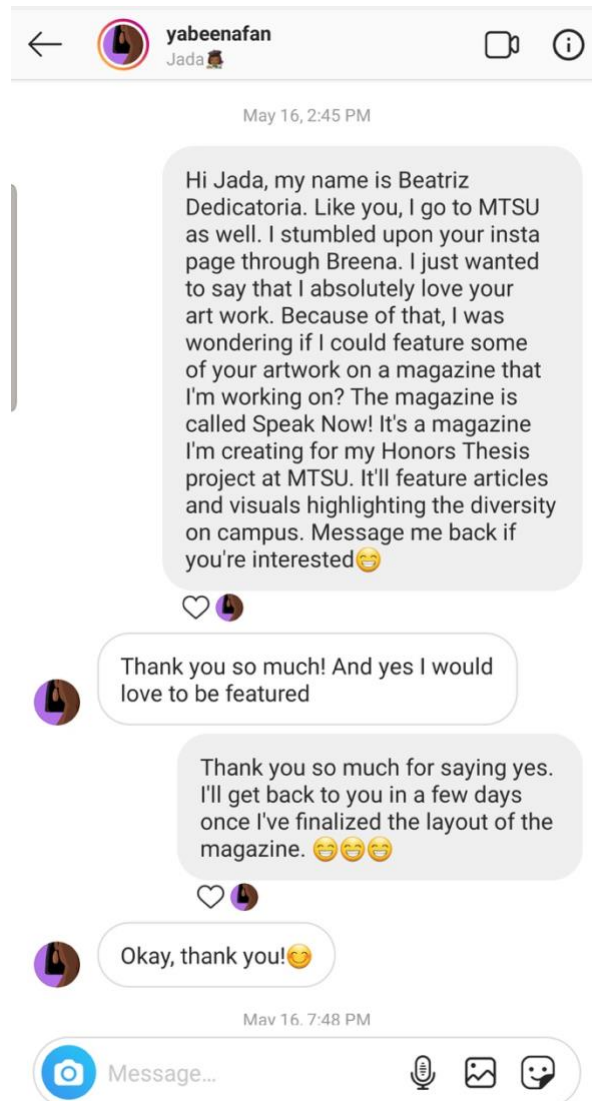
Permission from Ivy Tran



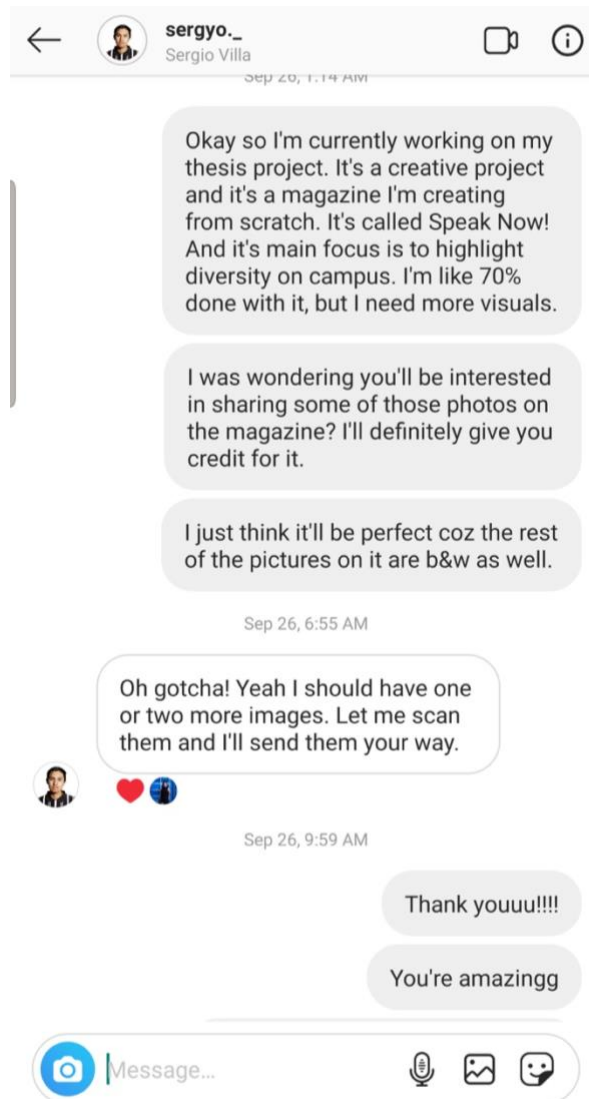
Permission from Martina Hoffmann



Permission from Jada Stewart



Permission from Sergio Villa





SPEAK NOW!

THE DIVERSITY ISSUE

Fall 2019

habla ahora!

jetzt sprechen!

نآل ا ش د ح ت!

SPEAK

parlare adesso!

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现在就说!

ngomong sekarang!

spreek nu!

NOW!

parle maintenant!

今話す!

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говорите сейчас!

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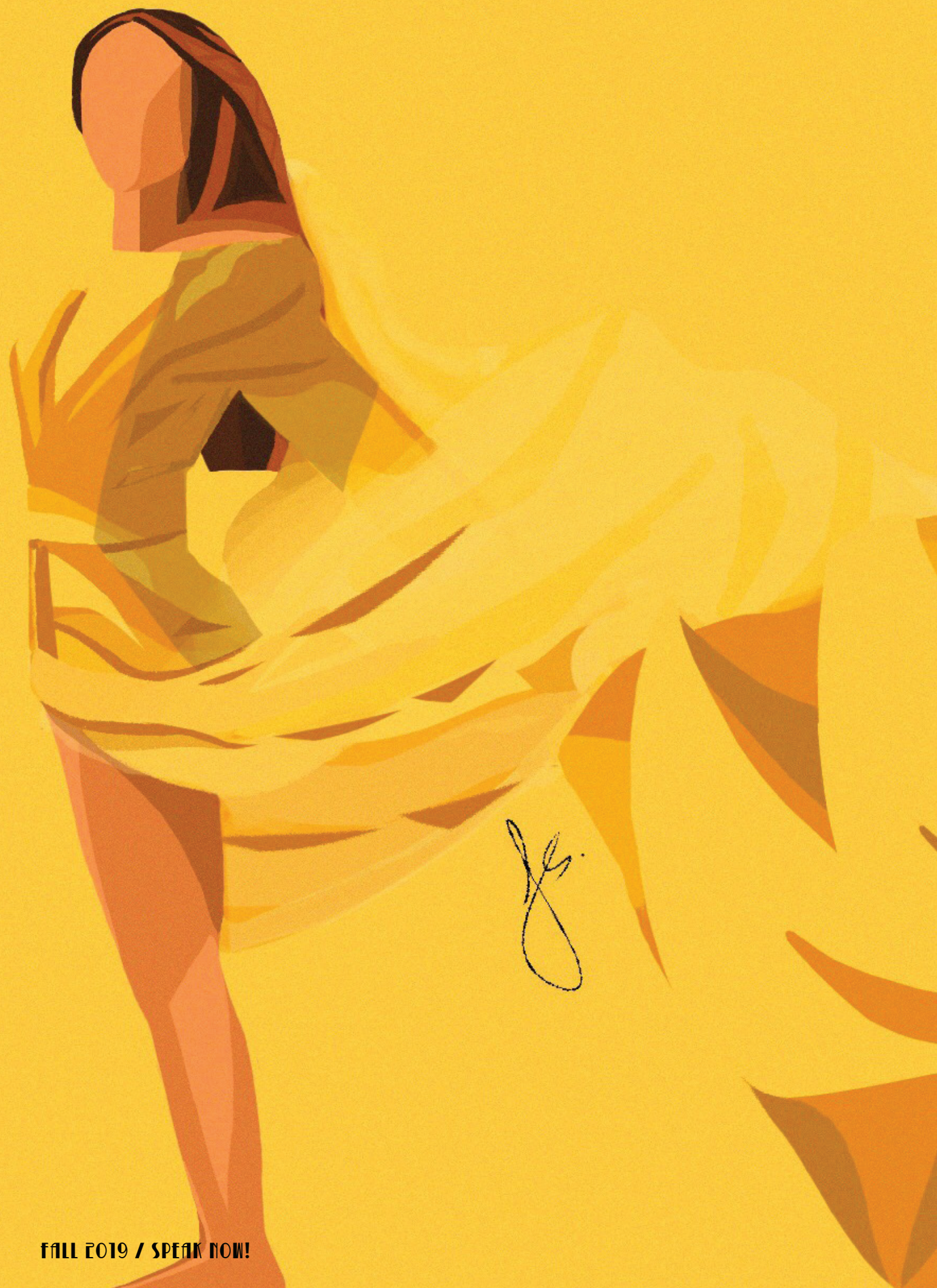
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Beyonce
by MTSU student,
Jada Stewart

EDITOR'S *letter*



As a storyteller, I feel the need to recount a significant event earlier in my life that would later on inspire the creation of this magazine. It was my junior year in high school. I was sitting in my Early American History class, looking around the classroom in silent awe. The walls were splashed with movie posters; pictures of important figures in history; a copy of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Amendments; and quotes from individuals who are long dead now, to name a few. One quote in particular, from George Orwell, caught my eye. It said,

“In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.”

Let's just say that from then on, I vowed to always tell the truth no matter how hard things get.

Fast forward to today, when fake news and lies dominate the media and everywhere we go, speaking up and telling the truth are slowly starting to become things of the past. Something that people nowadays, from what I have witnessed, try to avoid for fear of being labeled as an outcast. You see, one of the greatest things about being a writer is that telling the truth is a huge part of what we do, even if we are sometimes unaware of it. After all, even fictional stories are lies that eventually tell the truth if you look closely enough.

In this very first issue of *Speak Now!* magazine, you'll see that the main focus is to shine a spotlight on the diversity in my college campus, Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). Each person's story in this magazine tells a truth about their lives, but it is up to you to read between the lines and figure out what that truth is.

Finally, this magazine is called *Speak Now!* because I wish for it to consistently embody the notion of speaking out, being honest and brave, going bare, and exposing the truth. By the time you reach the very last page, I hope these stories change the way you see life and the people around you. I also hope that it inspires you enough to always speak up and tell the truth. If not for yourself, for someone else. You never know, you might just save a life.

So speak now, dear reader, because if not now, then when?

From me to you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Beatriz Marie R. Dedicatoria".

Beatriz Marie R. Dedicatoria
Editor in Chief

CONTRIBUTORS' *space*



SERGIO VILLA

Instagram: @sergyo._
Student and Photographer
Tennessee, USA

"People think photography is just taking pictures, but it's not. It's also a way of expressing yourself. If I show a group of people one photograph, they're all going to feel and interpret it differently. For me, taking pictures is more of a gut feeling. When I see something interesting, I immediately think, 'Okay, that's gonna come out good.' I know what it's gonna look like even before I take it. That's what motivates me to go out and take pictures." (See pp. 10-13)



MARTINA HOFFMAN

Instagram: @martina_hoffmann | Website: www.martinahoffmann.de
Freelance Illustrator, Motion Designer, and Art Director
Berlin-Kreuzberg, Germany

"I love variety, both stylistically and thematically. Whether it's outline drawing, oil painting or flat design, whether it's clay animation or stop motion design, whether it's music video, podcast logo or an explanatory film about the functioning of photovoltaic system—I like to work on a variety of projects. My personal 'playground' is children's illustration, though." (See p. 47)



IVY TRAN

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Student, Freelance Illustrator, and Graphic Designer
Georgia, USA

"Growing up Vietnamese in the US, it was rare to see East Asian artists featured in films, books, commercials, art, etc. This eventually inspired me to make art that's inclusive of my culture. I want other East Asians to think, 'Hey, that looks like me!' when they look at my work because I didn't get to say that growing up. We're all unique, and it's so important that we empower each other. My work exemplifies the balance between minimal and conceptual artwork because I want my viewers to focus on the message, not just the artwork. By challenging the societal standard of beauty with diverse subjects, I want to inspire my audience to embrace their diversity, strengths, and capabilities." (See pp. 28-29, 34-35, and cover page)



JADA STEWART

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Student, Freelance Artist, Graphic Designer
Tennessee, USA

"Social media influences my work a lot. I would scroll through my timeline and get inspired by images from my followers. I'm also influenced by the music I listen to, especially Ari Lennox's." (See pp. 6-7, 16, 22-23)

"The following images are part of my multiculture series that I started last semester. The purpose of the series was to capture second-generation immigrants rocking their native culture attire." - **Sergio Villa (@sergyo._)**



Sergio Villa in a photography studio



Denice Paredes and Carlos Rodriguez in
traditional Filipino clothing.
Photograph by MTSU student, Sergio Villa

MTSU student, Dijen Mo, in her
traditional Kurdish clothing.
Photograph by MTSU student, Sergio Villa





Brian Villa in his traditional Mexican clothing.
Photograph by MTSU student, Sergio Villa

OVERVIEW OF DIVERSITY AT MTSU

by Beatriz Marie R. Dedicatoria

For many current and past students of MTSU, a major factor that compelled them to attend the university was its rich diversity. From a visitor's standpoint, it is looking at people of different races, backgrounds, cultures, ages, and religions gathered together to study, learn their craft, and fulfill their dreams. From a student's standpoint, however, it is looking at a vibrant and welcoming community, a community some would ultimately call home. This is made possible by the university's continuous support on events that celebrate diversity on campus. While MTSU's efforts to showcase its rich diversity has produced favorable results, it is important to remember that everything is an ongoing process, that there will always be areas of improvement. A good starting point would be to raise awareness for more support for diversity-related programs and a more diverse faculty staff and curriculum. With this in mind, the aim of this issue is to educate and celebrate diversity at MTSU in such a way that could potentially inspire people to take action and push the movement for better publicity and support for diversity at MTSU forward.

Above Average in Overall Diversity

According to collegefactual.com, a website that ranks colleges from all over the US using different features, by adding up individual factors of racial, geographic, gender, and age diversity, MTSU scored above average in overall diversity ("How Diverse"). Some might even allude this great feat to MTSU's nondiscrimination policy, which states:

MTSU will promote equal opportunity for all persons without regard to race, color, religion, creed, ethnic or national origin, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, age (as applicable), status as a protected veteran, genetic information, and any other legally protected class.

In doing so, MTSU affirms that it will not tolerate discrimination against any employee or applicant for employment and will not subject any student to discrimination or harassment under any educational program and no student shall be discriminatorily excluded from participation nor denied the benefits of any educational program on the basis of any of the protected categories listed above. ("25 Equal Opportunity")

From this, it is clear that MTSU sees and understands the value of diversity. For students, specifically, they might credit the rich diversity to the Intercultural & Diversity Affairs, a center committed to celebrating the differences and educating the rest of the student population about the diversity on campus.

Intercultural & Diversity Affairs (IDA)

Just like how MTSU has a Veteran and Military Family Center that caters to the needs of veterans and families of veterans, the university saw the need to create a center dedicated to the diverse group of students here at MTSU. Ever since its formation, IDA has created several programs and hosted events, such as Heritage Month Awareness, Intercultural Graduation, LGBTQ+ Issues, etc. in order to foster a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for everyone. There has also been an increase in the presence of ethnic clubs and organizations, such as La Comunidad, Asian Student Association, Caribbean Student Association, Black Student Union, to name a few. These multicultural organizations host cultural events every semester, all of which are successful.

A Push for Diversity in Other Areas

Racial Diversity Among the Faculty and Staff

Although the events are usually successful, they are only successful within their scale, a small scale, to be exact. These events do not get advertised enough or given the attention and space they deserve by the university.

(continued on next page)

It does not end here, either. According to the 2018 MTSU Factbook, a document published annually to provide comprehensive information and easy access to the most frequently requested information about the university, it seems that MTSU's vibrant diversity only applies to its students for the fact that diversity, specifically racial diversity, among the faculty and staff are significantly low. Below is a table highlighting this finding:

Table 1. Diversity Profile of MTSU Faculty and Staff from MTSU 2018 Fact Book (23)

Faculty and Staff				
	Total (Full-time and Part-time)			
	Male		Female	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
White	523	79.6 %	519	79.5%
Black or African American	39	5.9 %	56	8.6%
Hispanic	22	3.3%	12	1.8%
Asian	40	6.1%	37	5.7%
American Indian	1	0.2%	1	0.2%
Two or More Races	4	0.6%	4	0.6%
Not Specified	28	4.3%	24	3.7%
Total	657	100.0%	653	100.0%

What this table shows does not necessarily mean that MTSU is not abiding by its nondiscrimination policy. Perhaps it just shows the need to re-focus on the level of diversity maintained among MTSU staff.

More Varied Curriculum

Besides the considerably low racial diversity among the faculty and staff, many students have also expressed their concerns about the lack of diversity in the curriculum. For instance, most film studies classes only talk about the film industry here in America. While the purpose of this is understandable, discussing the film industries of other countries would have been much better for the students. It is the same with the English department. All English majors are required to take British and American Literature classes, while World Literature classes, if there is any at all, are only offered as an elective. Having a varied curriculum is not just so students could have more options; it gives way for a more unique and diversified way of thinking as well. In fact, more and more colleges and universities across the United States are beginning to diversify their curricula since college leaders are quickly realizing that knowledge about domestic and international diversity is essential for the present-day students (Otten 12). Having a diverse student body alone is not enough to promote diversity at MTSU. According to Matthias Otten, Professor of Political Sciences and Intercultural Education, students don't learn about other cultures by merely interacting with other students. He claims that "intercultural learning needs reflection of individual and collective social experiences with people from other cultures rather than contact as such" (15).

For these reasons, it is difficult not to question the effectiveness of MTSU's nondiscrimination policy and its goal to celebrate one of its most notable features—diversity—due to its lack of support for diversity-related programs, the significantly low racial diversity among faculty and staff, and shortage of diverse classes. There is no doubt that MTSU is a great university; however, being great also means listening to the needs of its community. More importantly, acting upon those needs is necessary to show that the diversity at MTSU is more than just a percent or a facade that MTSU puts up to attract potential students. It will show that the university truly cares, and that is always a good thing.

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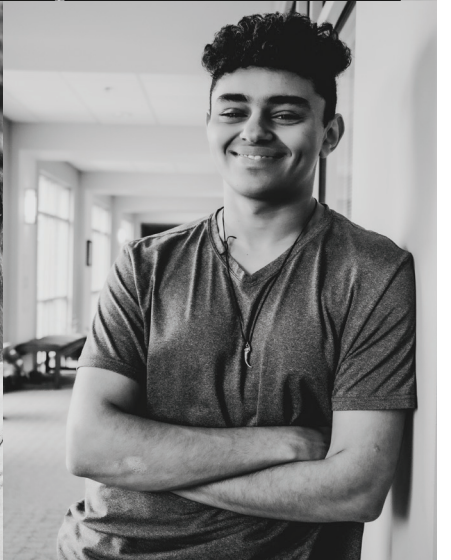
FEATURE *stories*

Bubblegum by
MTSU student,
Jada Stewart

A Look at Diversity at MTSU

This is a compilation of interviews from a selected number of students and professors about the diversity culture at Middle Tennessee State University. The interviews have been edited for clarity purposes.

Articles and photographs by Beatriz Marie R. Dedicatoria





AHMAD THOMAS

AGE: 19

MAJOR/MINOR: Video and Film Production/Advertising

BIRTHPLACE: Fort Polk, Louisiana

FAMILY ORIGIN: Somalia, Germany, Native American

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: Inclusion. Not only within races, but also within genders and different opinions. Diversity is key to learning, growing, creating a culture of understanding, and progressing in healthy ways. It's important, especially in this country which prides itself on being the "melting pot of the world." It's important to receive representation from minority groups in order to get a clear look at what the society wants, how they feel, and what's really important. If you ignore the opinions of any minority groups, then you're missing the bigger picture of what's important in a country.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: There are so many fields of study and schools of thought at MTSU it's amazing. The availability of many organizations at MTSU—there's Hispanic, Black, and Asian organizations, which have their own meetings, events, and representation on campus—in a way, represents what Murfreesboro and Nashville look like. I've never walked to my class without seeing someone who looks like me. I don't feel excluded at all here.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: Personally, I've never dealt with anything of that nature on campus. However, I definitely have attended talks where former students have mentioned stories about how the campus was overly racist against them. They started the student activism on campus because they were experiencing those things. One of the speakers, a young lady, talked about how when she asked her professor a question in class, he said something to the effect of "I don't speak/answer to people like you." That was a very eye-opening experience for her and for me.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: I try not to let negative experiences shape me because there's too strong of a biased placed in energy I don't want. I'd rather let education and conversation shape me around those issues. I'd rather learn about the history of what we can do to change it, what's currently being done to change it, and talking it out with people just to get their opinions.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE WHEN IT COMES TO HOW OTHERS SEE AFRICAN-AMERICANS: I would like people to not think that all African-Americans were born in the hood, that we're lazy, that we don't deserve certain positions of offices or certain success, that we're incapable of performing certain jobs, etc. That kind of narrative is extremely powerful. I would like people to stop thinking that just because an African-American speaks well, that they are less-cultured than our slang-talking brothers and sisters. I wish people would give more credit/respect to those who take the time to get an education to better themselves intellectually. Just because we came out of school as an intellectual doesn't mean we've lost touch with our culture. I don't know who started it, but I hate that way of thinking. The worse thing is, black people do that to other black people.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: Try not to hate all of them because there are people out there who will literally die for you. Try not to be so close-minded. Try not to put a blanket emotion on them, like they do to us. We need as many people as we can get to push back against hateful people out there. There's no reason to bother with people who actually do harm to other people. Don't give them too much of your energy because then, they have nothing to feed off of. Definitely defend yourself, though, if they try to do anything.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: My whole family, especially my parents. Whatever I did, my parents were always there. They made sure I could participate in different activities. I was an athlete all my life, my Dad coached me, my mom is always there to support me. They always made sure that I have what I needed. They always showed up. They *a/ways* want to show up to everything, which I'm very thankful for.



AREEZ SADIKI

AGE: 21

MAJOR/MINOR: Accounting/Business Admin. & Info. Systems

BIRTHPLACE: Nashville, Tennessee

FAMILY ORIGIN: Pakistan

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: Coming from a minority background, I really value diversity. We live in a society where we don't value it as much and there are misconceptions people have in terms of a specific culture, religion, and country. This is why promoting diversity is important: people can get educated and spread awareness about it.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: We have so many organizations on campus. MTSU is very welcoming.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU:

I'm about to finish my third year here at MTSU and I've never experienced anything like that. Outside of MTSU, I have a lot of stories. I was born in Nashville, but I also lived in Pakistan for 8 years. When I came back to the States (Oklahoma), a lot of people were not as knowledgeable about Pakistan. People tend to think that it's in the Middle East, but it's actually in Asia. I would always get called out in terms of my religious beliefs and people would associate me with terrorist groups. It wasn't just the students; the teachers often joined in on treating me differently. For example, we were reading a chapter that had a lot of Arabic names in it. I'm not even from the Middle East, but every time, my teacher would stop whomever was reading and make me read that passage out loud and make me pronounce it. My teacher would also use terms as "your people" and "you guys." It made me feel as if I wasn't a part of the school, like I was different from the rest of the people in class.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: After seeing and experiencing people being negative towards me, I shut myself off from everybody. Eventually, the experience pushed me to take the initiative to tell these people more about me and educate them about the truth. I started doing these presentations, talking to people outside of class, answering questions. It made me more involved in school.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: Ask questions instead of just believing what you see on media. I feel like if I hadn't gone to Pakistan and experienced what I experienced there, my knowledge would be really limited to the things I've seen on media. Going and living there was a completely different experience than what you see the media portray.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: Don't let negativity discourage you or stop you from participating in anything. Always stand up for yourself. I think that's what motivated me. Once people see that you can stand up for yourself, that's when they'll know that you're not someone they can mess with. Go ask them questions and they'll answer it, but they'll know not to mess with you *laughs*

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM IN LIFE:

My Dad was always there, was really supportive. My mom has always been supportive, but she was always scared at the same time. It scares her when I take the initiative to talk to people about who I am and when I would get into debate. She was scared for my safety, for my well-being. My Dad, however, would always tell me, "If somebody asks you a question or says something that is wrong or doesn't represent you or your culture, speak up."

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: I see it more culturally even though diversity is more diverse than just that aspect of it so for me, it is as people from different countries and cultures coming together to share their similarities and experiences.

BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: I don't see myself in that diverse position. For me, everybody is diverse. However, one of the things that I noticed about this campus is there's some kind of separation between people of different races. Blacks, Whites, Asians, and Hispanics have their own little group. Of course, there are some groups where we see some mixture. In Puerto Rico, we don't have that kind of division. Everybody is family. Here, you can see that separation, it's kind of sad actually.

PERSONAL STORY: I don't care about labels. Enjoy life and whatever calls you. That's how it is in my culture. I'm bisexual and I don't care what people think. I have other family members who are similar, if not the same as me. My grandfather, cousins, etc. are exactly like me. We're just open. Whatever color the wind goes, it goes. If it makes you feel good, go for it. Life is complicated enough. We can't be adding more s**t to it. Just be like Pocahontas or Moana: Go with the flow.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: What I like about MTSU is that it has a variety of cultural organizations that help promote cultural awareness. Being here [MTSU] made me realize that all of us have a lot of similarities despite our backgrounds.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: Another thing about MTSU is that although it prides itself as an extremely diverse campus and it does a good job promoting itself to international students, it's not inclusive. I've been experiencing that here. The administrative staff of IDA only dedicate their time and efforts in learning about one particular Latin culture, making the rest of us feel excluded. Even though we're all Hispanics, there's always a dominant group. For instance, during the Hispanic Heritage night, the organizers didn't include Caribbean people because they didn't think it was a part of Latin America. I fought hard for the Caribbean people to be included, to be seen, because despite not being included in the first place, they've selflessly expressed interest in wanting to contribute. Lastly, even though there are several cultural organizations on campus, a lot more are not aware of it. A lot of people don't think they could join a club because they don't look like the people from the club. No. We are open to everybody regardless of what they look like or where they came from.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: I was able to overcome feelings of exclusion by meeting other people with the same goals as I do. I had support from the Asian Student Association. I'm not Asian, but I feel like I'm home in that club. They're very inclusive that's why I try to protect them. They cheered me up after things with the previous club I was in ended badly.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: Be more accepting. People need to understand that we're all not just one thing. We're all a mixture of a lot and different things.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: Start learning about other people. It's all about education. We're in college, educate yourself. Be more open-minded. Don't put a label on somebody. Accept that we're all going to have our differences. For those of you who feel excluded, know that you're not alone. There's a huge family waiting for you.

TANYA LEE GONZALEZ

AGE: 23

MAJOR/MINOR: Criminal Justice (Homeland Security)/
Info. Systems and Asian Studies

BIRTHPLACE: San Juan, Puerto Rico

FAMILY ORIGIN: Spain, Portugal, Morocco,
Native American





Spa Day by
MTSU student,
Jada Stewart

*Ari Lennox by
MTSU student,
Jada Stewart*





MAXWELL PEARSON

AGE: 20

MAJOR/MINOR: Microbiology/Nutrition and Food Science

BIRTHPLACE: Carbondale, Illinois

FAMILY ORIGIN: United Kingdom

odd looks here and there. I mean I wear rainbow shirts and flower crowns. I look great, stop staring at me, I know. There have been a couple times in class when someone would bring something up that's racist or homophobic and I have to put them in their place.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: Oh, I like this question. It has given me an insight to how it is to be a minority. I'm white, I'm male, could I pass as a straight? Eh, but I'm not religious so I guess that's another one but really, the only minority box that I check is being part of the LGBTQ+ community. I feel like when you are a subject to discrimination, it opens your eyes up a lot and that's why I think it's really important to get out there and educate people because what I've been talking about recently is ally-ship and how being a good ally to other community is all about education. You need to learn what they're facing. Not just know, but you need to fully understand and so, being gay has made more open to seeing racism, sexism, etc. that otherwise a lot of people don't see.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: It would be nice to see the university step up in helping promote the minority organizations. If we're talking about the immediate change, it would be the general population understanding, specifically, the gender identity, because the transgender movement is the biggest one in our community right now with all the bathroom bills and transgender people having the highest rate of suicide and murder and *they're* the dangerous ones going into the bathroom. It's bullshit. Just because I haven't experienced something doesn't mean it's not a thing. It doesn't mean it's not valid and a lot of people think that way. Understanding is key.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: I don't want to be cliché, but it gets better. We've all heard that, but it doesn't get better on its own. You have to do something about it. You can't just sit and let things happen and think that it's gonna be fine a year later. You have to speak for yourself or you have to find somebody to speak up for you. You have to facilitate change, whether that's telling people to shut the hell up or educating them. Anything. It's definitely a process, but you have to work towards it.

BIGGEST INSPIRATION: Myself, does that count? I am my own role model *laughs* Since I was seven or eight, I've been very headstrong, I've done my own thing, danced to my own beat. I know that sounds terrible, but I've been a do-it-yourself kinda person. I believe that I'm a natural-born leader so I take it as my responsibility to step up and speak for people who need it but yeah, I inspire myself.

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: People who either look or think differently than you. Whenever and wherever you have diversity, it allows a broader view of everything.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: I'm gay. One of the major reasons I came to MTSU was because when I looked up MT Lambda, the LGBTQ+ organization on campus, I saw how active they were, how much they did for the university, and so that organization was one of the things that brought me here.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: I think that the student organizations are doing a lot to make themselves known. Each organization has their own week. Event after event, week after week, they do their best to get themselves out there. The university, however, doesn't promote that super well. For example, somebody sends out weekend updates on events and three weeks or so ago, nothing from the Women's and Gender Studies event was on there. Two weeks ago, nothing from the LGBTQ+ conference was on there. It was only something about the Spring fever or sports games. That's one thing I noticed that really got under my skin. We have the nondiscrimination policy, but the university doesn't promote the school as such. Another instance was during our Spring Out event. We were tabling at the Student Union and this guy with a name badge came up to us and said, "Hi, my name is AK47. My pronouns are bullets." He asked us something about bisexuality and then, the subject got changed to transgender, so I asked him if he knew the difference between the two and he said, "All I know was Bruce Jenner hit someone with his car and then decided to be a woman to get away with it." Things like that are super common and so I really have to try and put on my Walmart customer service smile. Personally, though, not really. I've gotten some

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: What you're used to isn't there. For instance, MTSU is diverse, but it wouldn't be diverse if everyone at MTSU was Mexican because I'm Mexican and that means we'd all be the same. Diversity happens when I'm surrounded by people who are different from me.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU:

Before, when people labeled me as Mexican, I used to be offended. I used to think it was derogatory because it was used that way. But now, I realized that there's nothing wrong with being Mexican and I really appreciate how MTSU helped me realize that. It made me proud of who I am.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: It was in my English class. I had this professor. She's older and had an older mindset. As a freshman, everything is new to you and as such, you kinda just sit there and keep your mouth shut no matter what's happening. She talked about diversity and how nothing has changed ever since slavery and how everyone has been fine with what happened. The truth is, not everyone has been fine. I wasn't the only one who felt uncomfortable; everybody else was. The funny thing is, she didn't discriminate against everybody. If you weren't straight, she was okay with that. But, if you weren't white, she wasn't okay with that. No matter what I said, even if I was just repeating what she was saying, I was still wrong. Every time I got a B on a paper and I would ask for feedback, she never gave me a proper answer. She would always say, "It's content." When I would ask for examples, she would just repeat what she said. She always started her answers with "I feel like you're wrong because..." That's when I realized it wasn't just about the paper, it was something more coming from her as a person and what she believes in.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: It made me not like English but looking back, I should've done something. I should've switched classes. It's not running away; it's choosing to be in a better environment. I should've at least done something to stand up for myself, to let her know that I wasn't having any of it instead of just sucking it up and being comfortable with being treated that way.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: People should realize that we're not that different. We should talk about similarities instead of differences. There are other minorities here and they would often tell me their stories. Just through the process of them telling and me listening, I got to learn that we're not that different. No matter where you come from or what your life was like, there's something that you've experienced that I, as well, have experienced.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: Get out there and talk to people. Talking to people makes you think for your own, more educated about what's going on, and address your feelings in a better way. You can always go read a book or watch a movie and it might impact you right there and then, but exploring what's out there and talking to people from different walks of life is so much better.

BIGGEST INSPIRATION: La Comunidad (The Community). It has provided me with a lot of friends. Being in a community that looks like you, thinks like you, understands you or tries to anyway, makes you braver because they're people you could talk to.

JESSICA PALMIEROS

AGE: 20

MAJOR/MINOR: Biology/Science, Chemistry,
and Humanities

BIRTHPLACE: Shelbyville, Tennessee

FAMILY ORIGIN: Mexico



ROQUE MARCELO

AGE: 42

MAJOR/MINOR: Video and Film Production/
Entertainment and Technology

BIRTHPLACE: Philippines

FAMILY ORIGIN: Spain

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: A constant effort to allow to be welcoming to people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and ideas. You're not just diverse one time; it has to be a constant thing that you make as part of the fabric of what you do. And welcoming is not just about tolerating someone. It's an active intention to engage with someone and come to an understanding to get to know people.

BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: I'm usually one of the two or three Asians in class. I'm aware that my viewpoints are in the minority and that people may not agree with it. I have to constantly navigate when I should and shouldn't speak up as opposed to someone who belongs in the majority who may feel more comfortable speaking up because they're surrounded by people who look like them, have the same backgrounds as them. There's more of a comfort level. I'm always debating with myself regarding what I should or shouldn't say. I often see that the people who speak up the most belong in the majority. I wish there was more of an awareness that every time you speak up, there's somebody else who's quiet, someone whose voice is not being heard.

PERSONAL STORY: I left the Philippines when I was three and we moved to American Samoa. Then, my parents divorced and I moved to Tennessee with my mom. I'm also an ambassador for the Honors College. A lot of my time is spent making films. Not only for my own projects, but group projects with other students. I volunteer to plant trees along the creek. I've done voter registration initiatives and activism off-campus. I've gone to rallies for Black Lives Matter and Prison Reform. I also sing and perform when I have the time.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: There are lots of people of color on campus. I do see that. What I like about MTSU is that there seems to be lots of cultural, but also economical diversity. Not everybody belongs to the top 1% in the nation.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: Nothing on campus. Only that I'm often surrounded by people who don't look like me and have really different backgrounds, so I always feel like I have to adapt to everybody else. That could be positive or negative, but it could get a little annoying sometimes. If I'm

surrounded by my family or other Asians, there's that sense of familiarity. I'm constantly having to acquiesce or just step back because other things I'm not familiar with are happening and I want to be respectful. I'm always questioning myself on how assertive I should be. I find that I'm always the one being accommodating.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU:

There's a lot of value in being able to adapt in different situations and environment. The more you can adapt, the better off you'll be. If you can be comfortable in a new environment all the time, I think that serves you well, especially if you meet a new person or start a new job. I think having adaptability skills can really help with that. I can shift from being super shy and quiet to performing on stage. I'm so used to adapting that I can ease myself in different situations without difficulty and still hold on to myself.





ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: I wish everybody here in the US could travel outside of it. It's probably not possible for many reasons, but I think there's a lack of exposure of how different the rest of the world is. I feel like if you can see how a family could live off of almost nothing in a hut and still find some degree of happiness, people will really benefit from that perspective. I also wish people respected their elders more. It doesn't really happen here in the US the same way it happens in the Philippines and other countries. Parents get sent to retirement homes and that doesn't happen in the Philippines. There's just this dedication to family and respect for elders in the community because we value the experience and the wisdom they can give. It's just the right thing to do because all the young people today are going to be old too and we're gonna want that respect from everybody else.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: If there's anything that's bothering you or anything you really want to say, find the best way to say it and do it but above all else, don't be silent. I'm a musician

and a filmmaker and I use my skills to share my ideas as a Filipino, as an immigrant. I realized that in this big world, there has to be space for my voice, for things that I value. Whatever mode of communication or expression works for you, find it and use it. Don't be silent. The more we speak out, the more we share our experiences and concerns, the more things can change.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: I'm really grateful to the Honors College because I got the transfer fellow scholarship and that's paid for most of college as well as funded my creative thesis project; therefore, I was able to express my ideas about the Philippines and immigration. The Honors College saw something in me that was worth investing and supporting in and it's great. When somebody believes in you, it's like somebody giving you life. It makes you want to try and do it. I hope that I'll be able to do that for others in the future because it's an empowering and valuable gift you can give someone.

Illustration by
Ivy Tran. Based on
@maybrevi's *Cherry Girl*





Orange by
Ivy Tran. Based on
@jacquelinewoodwell's
portait

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: Understanding everyone's backgrounds and learning about their situations and how you can further help the world around you.

BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: I don't see myself as a diverse person. I understand that I contribute to diversity, but I do come from a white, middle-class family. What's interesting about that is I grew up very privileged in comparison to those around me. My specific situation is difficult, yes, but I'm also impressed at what MTSU does to help me. Whether it's through the DAC (Disability & Access Center). They want me to do better so they really come through. They help me with my situation so I can have a good time and life on campus. At the end of the day, I don't really see myself as adding to diversity other than helping my friends and those around me better understand what my disability is like.

PERSONAL STORY: I was born two months early. They knew I had some form of brain damage, but they didn't know what exactly. They prepared my parents for the worst. They said that I would spend my whole life in a wheelchair, that I wouldn't be able to function in a normal society, and that I would need full-time help. When I was three, I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, specifically spastic diplegia cerebral palsy. Spastic means my muscle tighten and diplegia means two limbs which in my case it's my legs. However, I am very lucky that it doesn't affect my brain. The damage to my brain is about the size of a needle, but I've come a long way.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: People are very kind here. They hold the door open for me, ask me if I need any help. I'm okay with that. Some people with disabilities are not.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU:

Not on campus. Off campus, I've had some experiences with people shouting at me, telling me that people like me shouldn't go out in public, that I'm a worthless cripple. But I understand. Other people stand up for me, so it isn't that bad. It is hurtful, yes, but I know I have a purpose. I'm not just a disability. I think people tend to label me as just a disability and I'm not. I'm a whole person, like you. I do consider my disability as part of my identity, but that's about it.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: I don't give up. I'm tough. I keep smiling. I've learned that when people see me in public, some of them are scared. There's a stereotype for crippled people that we are always angry, so I try my best to just be a happy person because I don't want to fulfill that stereotype. Part of that is my parents. They were given the worst of the worst and they still believed in me, still worked with me just so they could give me the best life they could. Another part of that is my younger sister. We're ten years apart. I want to be a great influence for her. I want her to see that anybody can be happy, anybody can work through their difficulties.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: I want people to see us as people who can truly do anything that able-bodied people can do even if it has to be altered a little bit. I love hiking, but I have to know how narrow the trail is, whether or not there are people who'll be able to help me. Just don't put limitations on people. Feel free to ask questions. Not everybody is going to be comfortable answering those questions, but ask questions if you really want to learn more.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: The hardest part for me is the prospect of aging and how that'll affect my body because my body hurts all the time so my advice would be to take care of the body that you have now. Appreciate the abilities that you have. Every morning when I get up, I thank God that I'm able to put my clothes on, put my socks on because there are so many out there who can't and need full-time help. I can live independently and that 's amazing. Be grateful for whatever situation you have even if you're not fully independent.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: Her name is Ms. Susan. She ran the daycare where I used to be. She was like a grandma to me. She helped my parents fight with the doctors who said that I wasn't going to be able to walk or that I wouldn't be able to go to school with normal kids. She treated me the same as every other kid in the daycare—she made me do chores just like everybody else. I was never excluded from anything. She always found a way to include me.

SAVANNAH HEAD

AGE: 21

MAJOR/MINOR: Music Business/Public Relations

BIRTHPLACE: Jackson, Tennessee

FAMILY ORIGIN: England, Ireland, Scotland



GEORGE BOKTOR

AGE: 19

MAJOR/MINOR: Computer Science/
English (Writing)

BIRTHPLACE: Cairo, Egypt

FAMILY ORIGIN: Egypt

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: The propagation of new ideas from different places. It's not exclusive to skin color or nationality. If you're from a different place in the world, your ideas are going to come from different places and are going to be colored by different experiences.

BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: I feel like it's really easy for me to be a diverse person at MTSU. MTSU doesn't shackle anyone to one thing. There are no expectations. You can build your own reputation and personality at MTSU.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: There are a lot of clubs and organizations for a lot of different nationalities so I feel like although I haven't personally included myself in explicitly culture-based organizations and clubs, I know they exist and they're very vibrant.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: No discrimination on campus. Not even my whole life. But I have a story and this happened in Egypt. My mother is a Coptic Orthodox Christian and she was studying biochemistry. She was top of her class, one of the best in Egypt. She had the opportunity to get her PhD in Chemistry in America, but she needed to get her college's supervisor's approval for that first. The thing is, Coptic Orthodox people are a minority in Egypt. She's been working for this opportunity for 8 years now, so this was a really big thing for her. When she went to that superintendent, who was a Muslim, he saw that she was wearing a crucifix on her neck. He told her that he would sign the paperwork if she took the crucifix off her neck. She wouldn't do it, so he didn't sign the paperwork and that ended her career in Chemistry. I wouldn't say it ruined her life because she's a happy woman, but it changed the course of her life.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: My Mom told me the story and every single time, it hurts. If that was me and my entire collegiate career was killed because of some petty religious dispute, then I would've been a little more than angry. It scares me that the same thing might happen to me and I have very little tolerance for differences of opinions getting in the way of actual progress. Any kind of disagreement shouldn't be a hindrance in some sort of way. Opinions are not just there to piss people off; they're an accumulation of life experiences.



ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: I think religion shouldn't be a talking point on anything outside of religion. I don't think religion should be in politics and collegiate choices. I want religion to be extracted from the secular world and I want the secular world extracted from religion. I don't want people to make decisions based on things that aren't related to what they're talking about because that's what ruined things for my Mom.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: If you have someone in that specific situation or someone who is being discriminated against, the most immediate thing you can do for them is show them love. Show them that there are people out there who can support them, can prop them up, can make them feel good about themselves. Be there, be supportive, and try to let them understand that they're not the only one experiencing that because seclusion is a powerful thing. Let them know that it wasn't their fault that that happened.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: Everyone supported her. Family bond and the ability to link with blood relatives is really strong in Egypt. In Egypt, there's not a lot other than family. The idea of the American Dream in America and paving a road for yourself doesn't really exist in Egypt. Nothing really belongs to you. Everything you have belongs to your family as well. Since she came from such a strong familial culture, it wasn't as bad as it could've been in terms of how she perceived the whole situation.



WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: The ability to get along and be welcoming towards someone who looks, acts, thinks, and talks differently than me. Diversity fosters a place where people from all walks of life can share their stories and ideas freely.

BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: I enjoy being a part of the diversity community at MTSU. The reason I enjoy it is because I know I'm not the only one. Everyone around me, regardless of their skin color, race, gender identity, culture, background, ethnicity, etc. all have stories to tell, something to bring to the table. That fact makes it extra interesting.

PERSONAL STORY: I was born in the Philippines. My family and I moved to Indonesia when I was eleven. Five years later, we moved to the United States. Moving from one place to another was hard, but it helped me adapt to difficult situations better.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: MTSU is a pretty diverse campus and I definitely applaud MTSU for that. To be honest, it's one of the reasons why I chose MTSU. As an immigrant, it's important that where I spend some of the most important years of my life somewhere where someone like me is welcomed and celebrated.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU:

It was my sophomore year and this was around the time when President Trump was elected as President. Let me tell you why this fact is important—I'm a Republican and as much as MTSU is known to be a conservative campus, most of the professors in the Political Science Department program aren't. So back when I was still a Political Science major, I took this class called Research Methods. One day, I was sitting there minding my own business when a fellow classmate and friend of mine (we served in the Freshman Council together) just started talking about how terrible Trump is, which then led to him questioning my beliefs and choice to identify as a Republican. After I finished explaining things, he snorted and said something that I remember vividly to this day: "I hope you get deported." I was shocked and hurt, especially since not one person in class thought that what he just said was wrong. They all thought it was funny. While I'm aware that he said it in a joking way, telling an immigrant that you hope they get deported is something you should never do. What I remembered the most, however, was feeling embarrassed. I was embarrassed about being an immigrant and that's something I'll forever regret. Whenever I brought it up with someone in the department, all I got was a tiny bit of sympathy and these words: "Well, maybe you should examine your beliefs again, so people don't say that to you."



BEATRIZ MARIE REYES DEDICATORIA

AGE: 21

MAJOR/MINOR: English (Writing) & Video and Film Production/
Journalism

BIRTHPLACE: Manila, Philippines

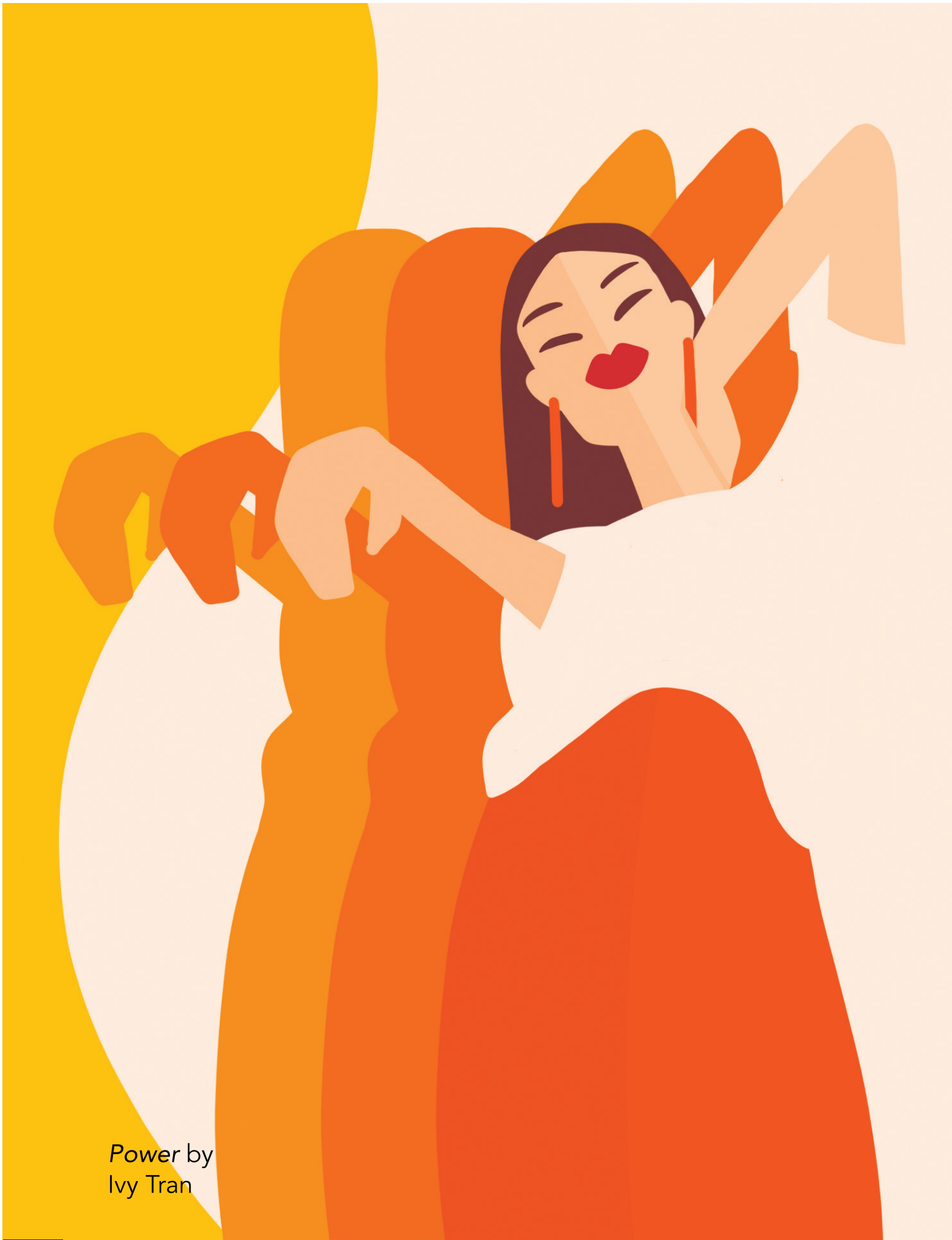
FAMILY ORIGIN: Philippines, China, Spain, Portugal

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: It's been about two years now and it still hurts every time I think about what happened. I'm not necessarily talking about me hurting, but more on the fact that it hurts because what he said was an insult towards my family and the millions of other immigrants who came here legally, who went through the daunting process, who never lost hope, who never resorted to illegal means no matter how hard the process got. In terms of how the experience shaped me as a person, I've learned the importance of letting go and distancing myself from something that's toxic for me. After the incident, I changed my major. Some of you might say that I just ran away and I think some part of myself, the part who always wants to face situations head on, thought so too, but I've done my part. I've confronted him and told someone in a higher position about what happened in the hopes that they'll make sure nothing like that ever happens to anyone. The thing is, when those things didn't work, I knew it was time to go. It's not about running away; it's about distancing myself from things that don't make me happy. It's about taking care of myself.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: Jokes hurt. Just because it's a joke doesn't mean it hurts any less so be careful about what or who you're making fun of. Be considerate of immigrants. You have no idea what we went through just to be here. I'm not saying give us special treatment, because don't. Trust me, we've dealt with worse things before so special treatment isn't needed. My point is please, please, please listen to our stories first before you say something foolish. Never assume, always ask. I guarantee you, we'd all be happy to answer your questions and tell you more about us and where we came from.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: If you ever find yourself in a difficult situation or place, don't be afraid to leave. It's going to be hard, but you'll thank yourself later. Choosing to distance myself from the department and the person who hurt me was one of the best decisions I've ever made. I was criticized for my choice, but I chose me over their opinions. I chose happiness. You're worth more than their words and actions. Never ever let anyone tell you otherwise.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: I'd just like to take this opportunity to thank my family and friends for their continuous support and love. They were there through it all and cheered me up during difficult times. I wouldn't be where I am and I couldn't have done it without them. My strength comes from them so I'm very thankful. I would also like to thank the people who've fearlessly shared their own stories. It's nice to know that someone else understands what I've been through.



Power by
Ivy Tran

Just Peachy by
Ivy Tran



DANNY PONDER

AGE: 57

MAJOR/MINOR: Psychology/Writing

BIRTHPLACE: Smithville, Tennessee

FAMILY ORIGIN: England,
France, Germany

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: All ages, races, sex, people of different character. I think knowing other people and their people is important. The world is going global. It's important to understand young and old people and people who identify different.

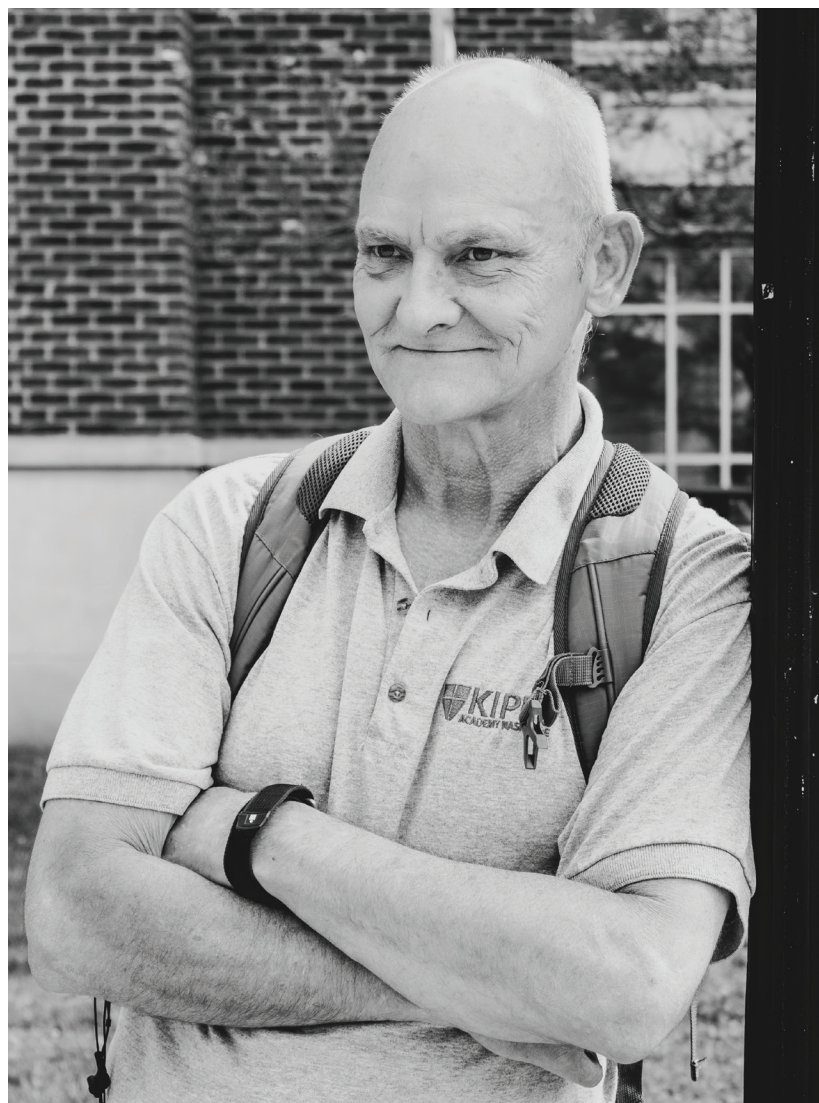
BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: It's tough. I worry about how young people will perceive me. "Why are you doing this now? Why didn't you do this 30 years ago?" I worry about how to communicate or get to know people because I don't want to offend anyone.

PERSONAL STORY: I worked as a machinist for 20 years. I injured my back, so I can't do that anymore. I have to find something else to do and I don't trust the government with a lot of economics stuff. You can't count on that. You have to take care of yourself. Also, my wife is dead. We were divorced when she passed away. She had issues with drugs and that's kind of why I'm going into Psychology. I want to help other people deal with their addiction. The marriage fell apart because of that, so I'm very familiar about drugs and addiction. I hate seeing people go through that stuff that's why I decided to go back to school. And I want to write too. I like sci-fi, but I also write from experience.

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: I think MTSU is very good at it. From what I see, I think MTSU tries to invite everyone, tries to make everyone feel comfortable so they're doing really good. You know, people who identify as another gender. They're really open about that.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU:
No, not really.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: You've got to do what you gotta do. Life is not easy. There are gonna be some uphill battles along the way and I've seen my share of it and this is just another one, another path, maybe a little more difficult but I'm good with that. I can handle it.



ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: A lot of the non-traditional students are not that old. People my age, I haven't seen a lot. The older you are, the tougher it gets. But they've got families so that's tough. Once you get past 40, you wonder how. I don't think the young ones look at them the way they do at older people like me. Younger people want to advance their career and the way I see things, they want people like me to retire. The thing is, some people can't—may it be for financial reasons or because they just don't want to. Older people have more experience, more things to bring to the table and I wish younger people could see that.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: Hang in there. Do it. Don't let other people's opinions change how you go about changing your future. Things change and a college degree is very valuable these days. The workforce is changing too. It's getting more and more about computers and the technical stuff. So yeah, stick with it.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: My family. They're very proud of me. "You got put down with your injury and now you're taking another challenge."

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: Acceptance. Knowing and realizing that we are different but still treating each other as if we are all the same. It's extremely important to me because I struggled a lot with self-identity growing up.

BEING A DIVERSE PERSON AT MTSU: I'm Hmong. Some people assume I'm Mongolian, Lao, and Chinese (Xiong), which are all not true. It's a little difficult to explain because not a lot of people know who we are. My Wikipedia answer is we are a group of people who live in the mountain region of Laos and Thailand and that's who we are and here we are now. *laughs*

POSITIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: I was finally able to come to terms with who I am and who I'm comfortable with. Now, I try to make sure that other people are comfortable with who they are. That they're not just changing themselves and trying to fit in with the social norm. What I like about MTSU is that everywhere you go, you see a new face. Even though the campus is quite small compared to other universities in Tennessee, the people here are all different. Even though you often see the same people every day, there's always an addition.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU: Surprisingly, my negative experiences weren't from people you'd expect. Throughout my life, I don't know if it's because I've been naïve or oblivious to the fact that they're making fun of who I am, I mean I kinda laugh it off, but I think the ones who hurt me the most are the people who are the same as me. Even though they try not to conform to the social norm, they actually end up being like everybody else. A fellow Asian colleague told me I'm not Asian enough. Like how can you measure that? It actually happens more than you think. It just surprises me how it comes from people you least expect. The bad thing is, I just brush it off because those people are family and friends, but when I'm alone and reflecting about it, I'm caught off guard by how much it actually hurts.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: I want people to realize that not all Asians are the same. Once you realize that, you start admiring them for their own differences. Also, educate yourself because it's a great feeling to be known by somebody. I always feel relieved when someone knows about Hmong. I don't have to explain who I am because they actually took the time to learn who I am.

BIGGEST SUPPORT SYSTEM: My parents who came here in the US, especially my mom because she worked at a factory for so many years and she didn't really live her dream, but now she is so that makes me happy. My five sisters as well. They really laid out a path for me to take so that's always a push for me to be better. My Asian Student Association members also inspire me. New members, especially those who are not even Asians but want to learn more about the Asian culture, I admire them a lot for taking that huge step. Every week, without fail, they come and they're still members up until today. That pushes me to do better and the fact that they keep coming tells me that I'm doing something right.

YER XIONG

AGE: 21

MAJOR/MINOR: Global Studies and Human Geography (Human Diversity and Multiculturalism)/French and Spanish

BIRTHPLACE: Fresno, California

FAMILY ORIGIN: Hmong



DR. RACHEL LEANDER

OCCUPATION: Assistant Professor of Mathematics/Applied Math

BIRTHPLACE: Knoxville, Tennessee

FAMILY ORIGIN: Germany, Ireland

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: To me, diversity in science is about diversity of perspectives and abilities. A person's perspective and abilities are influenced by their experience. If we are more diverse, then we are more robust because we can view problems from a variety of perspectives and use a variety of methods in order to develop better and otherwise unexpected solutions. For example, many problems can be solved both algebraically and geometrically, but problems often lend themselves to a certain approach. As a result, if a group includes algebraic and geometric thinkers we can solve problems more efficiently. We can also learn from each other's solutions thereby improving ourselves and building connections between disciplines. Similarly, within a class there will be a variety of reasons that students struggle to learn a new concept or procedure. When students voice these difficulties, it forces us to think deeply in order to carefully explain what is happening. In the process we replace intuition with deep understanding that can be transferred to other more complex problems.

PERSONAL STORY: I always knew I wanted to be a scientist. I thought I wanted to be a biologist. I love nature. I was interested in animals, plants, and I loved to collect them, catalog them. Then I got to university and I took a proof-based calculus course and it was a totally different than any other math classes I've taken. I found out I absolutely love writing proofs and so I got hooked on that and that's how I knew I wanted to do Math. I still love biology, so I found a way to combine both, to do both.

BEING A FEMALE IN STEM: It's been interesting. I always knew I wanted to do that, always felt empowered to do that. I guess it's because of the family I grew up in. I had a lot of strong female role models. My grandmother was an accountant in a lab. Later on, she and my grandpa started a pharmaceutical business. My grandpa was the pharmacist while my grandma ran the business. I felt confident because I've seen my grandmother being in charge. I felt like I could do whatever I wanted to do. When I got to college, that was when I started feeling strange. Maybe less confident about being a female in STEM because I was a minority so that was a little isolating. I was maybe one of the two females in my classes. Everybody was always really nice, but for some reason that was always intimidating. I would have nightmares about my classes. The boys would be there and they would get taller and taller and it was nothing they did. It was just me feeling strange and small in a male dominant group. When you're the only one who's different, it makes you feel like you shouldn't be there. However, entering the workforce in the real world, I was shocked at how women are sometimes treated. Some people in academia will marginalize women, assign them menial tasks, ignore their ideas, or even make sexist jokes. I was once in a situation like this, where people said and did things that made me feel very uncomfortable. I knew my ideas were not valued by these people. I got through that project. I did what I said I would do, and determined not to collaborate with them anymore. The experience was eye-opening for me. It has changed how I interact with others. I am more assertive, because I don't want to be treated like that again.

DIVERSITY AT MTSU: We are lucky enough in the Math department to have a diverse faculty. There are a lot of women and people from all over the globe so I really enjoy working here. Ever since I started working here, everyone has been inclusive, and I haven't encountered any discrimination on campus. It's been a great and supporting environment to work in.

HOW THE TOPIC SHAPED YOU: It changed my perspective and I felt more passionate about the need to promote women in STEM. Before those experiences, I always had support and everyone I'd been around had always been inclusive and so I didn't feel like it wasn't a problem. Then, I got into the real world and I realized how big of a problem it really is. It made me want to help more women succeed in STEM. I'm cautious of that now, too. Before, I just assumed that everybody would be that way and now, I don't necessarily assume that I'm going to be included and treated equally.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: I don't know if people still view STEM as something for men. My husband says when he tells people what I do, sometimes he does get the response, "Oh, I didn't think girls could do Math." I don't want people to say or think that. I want people to think that everyone can be good at Math. I think that Math is a very diverse field itself. You might say that you're not good at Math, but there are different kinds of Math. I think it's hard to believe that there's not some kind of Math you'll be very good at.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: It is important to know that you can succeed. Don't let others limit you. If somebody doesn't value your contributions, then that's their loss. Find others to work with. Discrimination is incredibly hurtful, and it can happen to anyone. It isn't rational and, if someone discriminates against you, it isn't your fault.





DANIEL GREEN

OCCUPATION: Director of Intercultural Diversity Affairs

BIRTHPLACE: Chicago, Illinois.

FAMILY ORIGIN: Africa, England, Scotland, Ireland, Jewish, Native American

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: It's about embracing people's similarities and differences because quite often, people forget that we have more similarities than differences. Some of those differences range from sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political beliefs, disability, socioeconomic status. To me, diversity is beauty that's beyond just physical features.

PERSONAL STORY: I oversee programs and services that address issues in diversity, social justice, and programs and services that educate the campus and the greater community about the many cultures that are represented here at MTSU. I carry these tasks out through problematic initiatives and celebrating heritage months. I work with organizations such as Muslim Student Association, Asian Student Association, Black Student Union, La Comunidad, Futuro, Caribbean Student Association to name a few. I work with a lot of multicultural organizations to help them bring awareness to students who are not familiar with their culture. This is a good opportunity for everyone to learn more about other people from all over the world. At the same time, we host events and other activities for students to embrace their own culture and find a home away from home. I oversee the IDA board, which consists of Presidents of all the multicultural events, and we brainstorm ideas, plan it, and make it happen.

NEGATIVE DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES AT MTSU:

Not on campus. I experienced racism in this town where I previously worked at. I was driving and looking for a place to eat. I guess I wasn't driving fast enough, and an elderly couple drove up beside me, rolled their windows down, and called me the n-word and that I needed to hurry and get out of the way. They used a lot of profanity.

ONE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: I don't believe in race. I'm not saying it's not true or that we should ignore it, but someone invented race to categorize the color of or the melanin in your skin. That's not right. Our skin color shouldn't be used to separate us. There's only race to me and that's the human race. We're all people. We have differences because of how our ancestors moved and the temperatures in those places. The climate of a place plays a factor in how a person's skin color, eye color, and hair texture look. One of my goals is to get people to realize that we're not that different. We all bleed the same.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE: Since we already have that label, my advice is to embrace who you are. There's nothing we can do to change what has happened and the ways society has abused and categorized people. People should embrace the beauty of being unique, but don't use it in such a way that you feel you're above someone else because of your skin color. One of the things I realized is that humans can see color. People look at different colors of flowers and animals and they think it's beautiful. Why can't we admire the beauty of colors that's within our species?

WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS: I think diversity in America has a lot to do with understanding the richness of this country. As a writer, it's trying to work with that richness, that complexity. That's one part. Another part is understanding that people have unhistorical ideas on when America started. They think America started when their people moved here, but no. It was already a place that was rich in diversity before the immigrants stepped off the boat. Whatever America is, it's still an unfinished project. More people will come and contribute. It's filled with a lot of change, but there's also threads of continuity so tapping into that is what it means to understand diversity. On a more personal level, it has something to do with both the juxtaposition and connection between both my mother and father since they came from two different places.

GROWING UP PUERTO RICAN: I don't have the traditional experience of a Puertorriqueño because when people think of Puerto Ricans on the mainland, they think of it as an urban center. It's never thought of as a rural thing. I just got lucky that I grew up in both. I grew up in Hartford, which had a lot of Puerto Ricans. Then, I moved back to Michigan. Predominantly, I think of myself as a rural, midwestern kind of person so my sense of being a Puerto Rican was kind of erased. It wasn't often recognized. I just had the last name "Arroyo" that no one knew how to pronounce. They knew I was different. The second part is about my identity. Growing up, I don't think you really refer to yourself as this or that. You're just trying to grow up and belong. Eventually, at some point, someone will point it out and when that happens, you start looking around and believe you're different. Embarrassment, shame, trying to suppress my identity filled me up then.

HOW IT SHAPED YOU: That's probably why I'm a writer. I distinctively remember living in Connecticut when I was a kid. I had issues there. I didn't know what the issues were, but I was very hyperactive. They were going to put me on Ritalin (a drug for ADHD kids), but maybe it was more of a way for the teachers to control the kids. It wasn't just because I was hyperactive; it was also because I had difficulty learning since I grew up in a bilingual household. When I was a kid, my playmates spoke Portuguese, Spanish, French, etc. Then you go into a classroom and you're just doing everything in one language. It was stifling. Because of that, my parents put me on a plane and sent me to Michigan to live with my grandparents. They didn't want me to be put on that medicine. My grandpa wasn't abusive, but he was very authoritative and used a belt. I grew up without my mother and father for a year. I went back to Connecticut. At school, I was always in the basement practicing my pronunciation of different things. I'd have a picture in front of me and I'd have to say its name out loud. That separated me from everyone. It was shameful since I had to have special education. Later, I changed and spent the rest of my time reading advanced level books. Later on, we moved back to Michigan, and while everybody was reading at 5th-grade level, I was reading at 8th-grade level. My teacher didn't like that. He didn't believe I was working that high. He brushed it off and told me to keep studying at the 5th-grade level. From that point forward, I did terrible in school. School became unimportant and I almost failed high school. Eventually, I picked myself up by reading a lot. Something similar happened in college. My professors weren't very kind. They had a lot to say about my writing and English skills and I thought that I had to work harder. I felt I had to do double the work. At the same time, I still wanted to keep my identity, bring some of my roots into my work. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes, language equals identity. If you question my language, you are questioning my identity. You silence me.

ADVICE TO WRITERS: You have to get out of that box where you think you're just writing in English. You can't take your language—English—for granted. Look at your language from different perspectives. Even with dialogue, for example. You have to see that when your character speaks, there is an intention behind the words. You have to remember that whoever is going to read those words will interpret them differently. You can't take the language, perspectives, or meaning for granted. As a writer, read, read, and read. And then read some more. Fill yourself up with as much diverse literature as you can. That way, your language will be rich with all that diversity. The more linguistic diversity you have, the better you're off. I truly believe that people who know several languages are more creative than those who only know one because when they sit down to write, they're relying on all those languages. Make that a part of your identity as a writer. Ask yourself how you can foster that linguistic diversity in your writing.

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FAMILY ORIGIN: Puerto Rico, American



A photograph of a rocky coastline. In the foreground, there are large, grey, jagged rocks. A wooden walkway with a railing runs along the edge of the rocks. In the background, a city skyline is visible across a body of water. The sky is overcast. The text "TRAVEL tales" is overlaid on a dark red banner at the top left.

TRAVEL *tales*

Seoul Searching: Finding Myself One Step at a Time

Article and photographs by Beatriz Marie R. Dedicatoria





Ever since I stepped foot at MTSU, I knew I wanted to go study abroad. It was hard not to go a little crazy as I browsed through the hundreds of study abroad options MTSU offers—there were just too many and it was too hard to choose! It wasn't until the end of my sophomore year that I finally chose Seoul, South Korea.

Going to South Korea was one of the things I promised myself when I was young. I was and still is a huge fan of Korean dramas, K-pop, and Korean cosmetics. I wanted to go there for all of that, but I had a more important goal—study its film industry so I may one day write my own dramas and movies and eventually, bring all of that to Hollywood. This is why I chose to take a Korean language and film class at Hanyang University, one of the top universities in South Korea.

Before going to Seoul, I had a lot of expectations. I expected myself to go to every tourist spot, try different types of Korean food, make lots of friends, ace all of my classes. Heck, I even saw myself to falling love because why not? Couples are literally everywhere in Seoul, something I immediately found out on my very first day. I might even go as far as to say that if there was such a thing as the couple capital of the world, it'd be Seoul. Or at least I think it should be. But finding love is not what this is about. Yes, I had a lot of hopes for this trip, but the one that mattered the most was finding myself.



Growing up, although my family and I moved from one country to another, going solo in a foreign country scared the living daylights out of me. I remember rambling to my Dad about the different things that could go wrong on our way to the airport. All he said was, "Relax. Take it one step at a time. It'll eventually fall into place." Easier said than done, but I forced myself to do it. If there was something I'm inexplicably good at, it's pretending I'm calm when all I really want to do is panic. That was the kind of attitude I forced myself into as I went through security check in Nashville, waited for my layover in Seattle, and went through immigration in Korea. It only wavered a little when I got lost in Incheon airport and almost missed the shuttle towards the terminal where the rest of the study abroad students were waiting. Luckily, with beads of sweat trickling down my back (I made the mistake of wearing a long-sleeved shirt and a jacket in a hundred-degree and extremely humid weather), I made it with about ten minutes to spare. Obstacle one conquered. One step at a time.

Once my program began, everything fell into a routine. I'd wake up, eat breakfast, go to class, do homework, then go out and eat. Since it was the same for the local students, I felt like I was living like a Korean college student. All of that didn't come so easily, though.

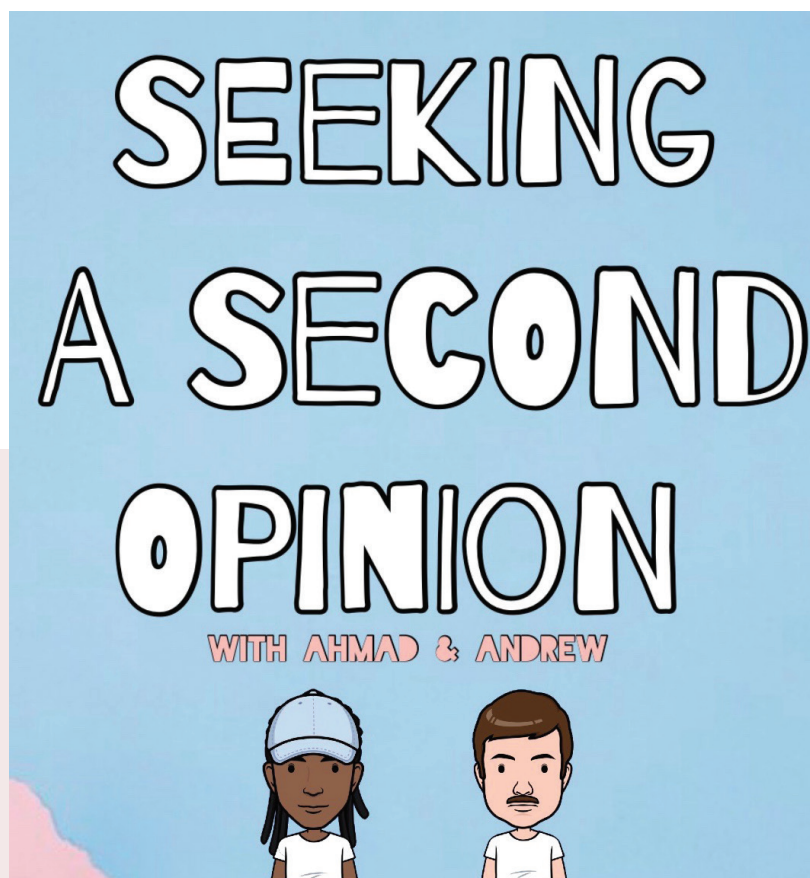
Different fears had to be conquered. Fortunately, I didn't have to do it alone. Thanks to my decision to sign up with a study abroad provider (ISA), I had immediate friends, most of whom are some of my closest ones now.

The first obstacle was ordering food. Ordering food in Korean was difficult and probably sounded really painful to the ears of the Koreans nearby. The key, I realized, was to listen to the locals do it. We listened and imitated and soon, we were ordering like the locals. Then, we have Seoul's subway system. As someone who's never had to use the subway before, going in there was something similar to an art student walking inside the New York Stock Exchange. Thanks to the amazing Kakao apps (Korean version of Google) for navigation, my friends and I were able to find our way around Seoul and back to our dorms. Speaking of finding our way around Seoul, something none of the blogs nor Google warned me of, is its really steep streets. Hanyang University is basically on a hill that some of my classrooms are underground. I had to take the subway just to get to my first class with minimal sweat and without my calves giving up. I eventually started walking because as one of my study abroad friends would say, "Do it for the culture."

I could go on and on about my adventures in Seoul, but I guess what I really want to say is that although my experiences tested my limits and pushed me out of my comfort zone, I was able to learn a lot about the Korean culture and myself. Studying abroad made me realize that I could take more than I thought I could, that I'm stronger and braver than I thought. My final message is go out and see the world. It doesn't have to be another country, just go somewhere by yourself. It's amazing what you'll find out. Always remember that it goes both ways: when you explore the world, find out every little thing about it, including the good and the bad, you find out something about yourself, too. In my case, I found what I was looking for. I know finding oneself is an ongoing process, but I think it's interesting that I found a huge part of myself in a country that's not even mine. Someday, I hope you're able to experience something similar too.



TRENDING *now*



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