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*A World Without Labels*  
3rd Place, High School Essay

America is the land of dreams, freedom, and opportunity, isn't that right? When I picture some of our country's toughest challenges, I think of serious social issues such as gun control, poverty, hunger, and substance abuse, just to name a few. Yes, these issues are covered by mainstream media and commonly discussed, but have we truly progressed in the last 50+ years? We are still facing racism, sexism, classism, and every other ism out there. Citizens of America, we cannot stay silent anymore. We need to help liberate our world from social injustices and strive for a world of acceptance and equal opportunities. If everyone could just start making a change, even little incremental changes, slowly but surely America will begin to restore its greatness and set an example for the rest of the world.

Let me paint a clear picture for you, In the last 150 years, America has reluctantly advanced humanity's interests. For instance, in 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation to end African American slavery. A century later in the 1960s, the African American community was still battling formal segregation, and continues to deal with racial injustice today. Similarly, women finally gained the right to vote in the 1920's. At that time, this was a tremendous breakthrough in social equality; yet 100 years later, women still run into glass ceilings in the working world and in politics. According to Harvard University "women earn about 78 cents on the dollar compared to men" (Dina Gerdeman). After 45 male presidents in a row, isn't it time to include the other half of our civilization? Improvement requires change, and change requires the courage to do unprecedented things. Every time we remove a violent dictator from power and seed a brand new democracy, or break through a nationality barrier in the White House we empower America to evolve and wash away societal challenges that have existed for far too long.

Having said that, for every step America takes forward, it often takes two steps back. Our country has been devoured by gender and racial inequality. Okay, but exactly what can be done about this problem? Well, we need to remove the labels, the restrictive and inaccurate titles that consume humankind. Beginning in our youth, we are categorized by labels based on gender, skin color, sexual orientation etc. This 'me' and 'you' mentality, instead of an 'us' school of thought is the beginning of why we fear our differences instead of celebrating them. Labels are not conducive toward social equality and justice. Historic leaders like Gandhi, Sojourner Truth, or Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated their lives to fighting labels and social inequalities like racism. It seems our country sorely needs another generational movement to help with 21st century issues that so profoundly affect today's youth.

Today, there are higher rates of depression, violence, and suicide among teenagers than ever before. Research has found "gender-based restrictions on girls leave them at a greater risk of dropping out of school, pregnancy, child marriage and exposure to violence, depression, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases" (Friza Pirani). While boys are more susceptible to substance abuse and suicide due to these gender-specific limitations. I propose that as our world has become a more technology driven, socially networked reality, the negative aspects of these labels have magnified which then worsens the issue, like a trend spiraling out of control. Thirty years ago a student could pass notes and gossip about someone and after a week of effort, the rumor mill might have reached 30 people. Nowadays, in 30 seconds someone wishing to hurt someone else, using verbal bullying, can reach thousands of students while hiding behind the anonymity of technology. Our world is never going to reduce its use of technology so the only way to attack this issue is to go after the labels themselves and to teach others to celebrate all the

unique qualities that make us a complete species, and not subgroups of competing races, cultures, religions, genders, or societally “expected roles”.

My dream is a world where we don't rely on societal labels to predetermine how to feel about one another. Imagine a world where everyone is just part of the human race. Simply, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” (Martin Luther King Jr.). We need to not judge and discriminate. Young girls will no longer be told they are weak and emotional, but instead that they are strong and passionate. Young boys will no longer hear they need to be strong and aggressive, but instead that it's okay to be vulnerable. Women will not be the homemakers and men will not be the breadwinners, but the two will work codependently. We will become a land where being hispanic or black, gay or straight, won't define who you are as a person. A place where your socioeconomic status or gender won't hold you back. Once we break this cycle, then our country will finally be in the the words of Martin Luther King Jr, “Free at last, Free at last, Thank God almighty we are free at last.”