

S-L-M

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Whenever a person asks you who you are, the natural response is to give your name. What else would suffice as a distinguisher? From birth, it is the go-to summary of a person's identity. My name is Souleye, and for most of my life, I had no clue what my name meant. Turns out it's derived from Sulayman, which is translated into English as Solomon. Since my family is West African, we use many variations of Abrahamic names like Solomon, names that would be considered "exotic" or "peculiar" in the United States. I always took pride in my clearly African name, however, seeing it as a stronger distinguisher than the numerous Johns or James here. I always knew that I was Souleye Kebe, an African.

Being born an African, I had to come to terms early on that people who look like me haven't had a historically positive relationship with the United States. What made it easier was that I didn't have to accept that by myself, because I lived in New York City where everybody came from diverse backgrounds, many of them having similarly complex relationships with the country we were born in. Coming to Westport was admittedly a culture shock, since I had never seen so many people with such relative conformity. The students here had the same clothes, same style of speaking, and same style of general being. They also shared the same statements: requests like "Can I touch your hair?" remarks such as "I don't see color," and "boasts" like "I had a Black friend in elementary school." I thought that these words were nothing more than stories, and so I was astonished to hear people say them to my face. Through that, I remained Souleye Kebe, an African from New York City.

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Despite me going to school here for three years, I still wouldn't rush to ever call myself a Westporter. I value my outsider perspective too much to seemingly diminish it with that title. I've found many outlets here to express that perspective, such as with my position on the Board of Education allowing me to filter the opinions of students and to discern which pieces of feedback best represent us as a school. These outlets, however, are more representative of my identity as it relates to attending Staples High School, and not of my identity as a "Westporter." These outlets make me Souleye Kebe, an African from New York City attending Staples High School.

When TEAM Westport asks students like me to propose specific changes to combat hatred and bias, I wonder why this burden of fixing systemic exclusion falls upon those already navigating its harms. The unabated truth is that it's not my responsibility, nor the responsibility of any other kid, to act as Westport's savior, driving it towards diversity and away from hatred. While I can and will support the town in any way I can towards that goal, it is incumbent upon the residents of Westport to seek that change for themselves. Every person must look inward and examine their own potential predispositions and immediate judgements, determining for themselves whether they want to put the effort towards a more kind and tolerant Westport. We can mold students towards that mindset by implementing diverse thought processes in all parts of their education, showing them that the world they live in is a mere slice of true reality, and is not reflective of how diverse the world truly is. However, we can't force them to make a positive step, it's entirely on them.

Living here, I see my identity spread between the two continents of America and Africa. The distance between these two places has made me realize that I am in truth a child of the world, as

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all people are. We often forget how we are all inhabitants of the same planet, being too caught up in the immediate to notice. We think and say disgusting things to others outside of our close proximity because the distance protects us. This is not a proper way to live. I doubt that I would subscribe so fully to this realization had my identity not been spread as far as it has, had I not been afforded this perspective uncommon to the people of Westport. While I think this perspective is a strong impetus towards global thinking and away from prejudices and bias, it is incumbent upon the Westport community to carry that energy forward.

I will not tell this community the minutiae of every step they need to take to make Westport a more welcoming place, the town must first see for themselves the peace that can be made and that can exist by celebrating diversity and opposing hatred. Look at the names of the people of the world. My name as well as its many variations are all derived from the triliteral root S-L-M. We hear it in Salam and in Shalom and in Solomon and in Shlomo and in Sulayman and in Souleye. This root means peace, which is something we can all strive for. My name is Souleye Kebe, an African from New York City attending Staples High School, who is working to be an advocate of peace.

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