One of the Purdue English Department’s longstanding traditions is its annual Literary Awards contest; inaugurated in 1928, only a four-year hiatus during World War II interrupted its continuous recognition of excellent writing. It has included such literary luminaries as Carl Sandburg (1930), Robert Frost (1940), Katherine Anne Porter (1948), William Golding (1962), Gwendolyn Brooks (1974), Adrienne Rich (1992), and Sherman Alexie (2007) as guest speakers for the banquet celebrating the winners. This year was no exception: Margaret Atwood’s words and work struck the audience as particularly timely. At 77, she said she’s at the W.O.W. stage of her career (“wise old woman” or “wicked old witch’’); the resurgence of popularity of The Handmaid’s Tale (1988) suggests its “prescient fiction” resonates with readers in Trump times (Bangert, 2017). The Literary Awards primarily features undergraduate and graduate writing of students across disciplines from Purdue’s main and satellite campuses, but it also includes a high school contest open to all students in Indiana. Since I joined Purdue’s faculty in 2006, I have had the pleasure of assisting my colleague Christian Knoeller—the creative writer in our English educator foursome—who has spearheaded the high school portion of the contest since Y2K. Part of my job has been to determine the winners of the short story and essay categories, a task that takes me back to my high school teaching days, assessing adolescent students’ work and imagining the prompts that might have generated such writing in their English classes. It’s fun to read the submissions without having to justify my aesthetic response (or lack thereof) on a rubric!

This year I had an especially good batch of submissions, so my job was challenging. One essay in particular gave me chills, not because it was
the best writing of the batch (it ultimately earned an Honorable Mention) but because its message was eerily similar to my editorial from the January 2016 issue of *English Education*. It, too, invoked Martin Luther King Jr. in its call for compromise and reconciliation of polarized positions to achieve common goals. It, too, contained a sense of urgency and hope. I wondered how such an essay—how such a writer—came to be.

Fast forward a couple of months to the deadline for this issue’s editorial. The idea of incorporating the essay in some fashion had been percolating in the interim, so I decided to reach out to the author (Samarth Sheth) and his teacher (Frederick Bracher) to see whether they might be willing to have a conversation with me. As much as I would have liked to meet them in person, the 3½-hour drive to Newburgh, Indiana—a quaint town just north of the Kentucky border on the Ohio River, within the metropolitan area of Evansville—made Skype a more attractive option. In anticipation of our appointment during one of Fred’s conference periods, I looked up their school’s demographic and performance data to get a sense of the birthing ground for Samarth’s essay.

With nearly 2,000 students, Castle High School is twice as large as the other high school in the Warrick County School Corporation¹ and slightly more diverse, with 12 percent minority enrollment compared to 5.9 percent. Castle also has fewer students on free and reduced-price lunch—16.8 percent compared to 38.9 percent—but both schools are White and economically advantaged relative to the state’s statistics of 31 percent minority enrollment and 45.7 percent of students on free and reduced-price lunch. A-rated Castle consistently outperforms its B-rated sister institution as well as the state on standardized tests; over the seven years of available data on the Indiana Department of Education’s website, students’ scores on End of Course Assessments (ECAs) averaged 12.5 percent higher than the scores of Indiana students as a whole. Castle students also outperformed the state average by 17.1 percent on the new (only 2016 data are available) Indiana Statewide Test of Educational Progress, courtesy of Pearson, which is replacing the ECAs.² Teacher performance ratings mirror these favorable statistics: 60.9 percent of Castle teachers were rated “highly effective” in 2014–15 compared to the state average of 41.2 percent.³ In short, Castle seems to be a typical high-performing high school in a predominantly White bedroom community. I wondered whether such an environment fostered or hindered the sensibilities evident in Samarth’s essay.

During our 45-minute Skype conversation, it quickly became apparent that, at least in Fred’s classroom and Samarth’s experience, Castle is the educational nirvana that it appears to be online. As the senior AP English
and film lit teacher, Fred has the flexibility and discretion to teach how and what he wants, including social justice–oriented topics and texts such as apartheid, Ryan White’s biography, and *Crash*. A 27-year veteran who is from the area, he feels it is his responsibility to ensure students engage with the world and issues outside of southern Indiana so that their transition to college is less of a shock than it was for him. Fred started the AP program at Castle in 1992, just two years into his tenure, and became an AP grader in 1998. This summer job helps him stay abreast of developments in the AP world, but it also serves as a stimulating professional community of like-minded educators and intellectuals: He says about one third of the 600 or so graders are high school teachers; the rest are from higher education.4

The seed for Samarth’s essay was planted in Fred’s AP class, where students had studied the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and honed their argumentative writing skills. But the essay itself was not a class assignment. Rather, Samarth had sought out scholarship opportunities of his own accord, and one caught his eye last winter: the 2017 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Art, Writing, and Multimedia Contest. Sponsored by the Indiana Civil Rights Commission in conjunction with the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Indiana Holiday Commission; Indiana Arts Commission; Indiana Black Expo, Inc.; and the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the contest resulted in a $500 scholarship. The contest’s theme was as follows:

King said, “Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.” Through art, writing, or multimedia, use this quote as inspiration to show how your generation can create a bridge to peace for the future.5

Samarth’s essay “A House United” won the competition, and he subsequently tweaked it for Purdue’s Literary Awards contest, where it came across my desk in the iteration that follows.

A House United

As I look upon the world today, with its triumphs and struggles, I ask myself: Where are we now and where can we be? We sometimes focus so much on the end goal of peace and tranquility that we forget that it is that very quality of respect and calmness that forms the stepping stones for greatness in the future. Are we so different? We must focus not on looking at each other as a house divided, but on praising each other as a family of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints that ultimately has the same goal of a better future. On June 16, 1858, Abraham Lincoln stated that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” essentially stating the well-known aphorism “united we stand, divided we fall.” Does history not show the verity in such a proclamation? Consider Mahatma Gandhi,
Editorial

Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, and, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These individuals and countless others have definitively displayed to the world the power of nonviolence, the power of compassion, the power of understanding, the power of peace.

There are those who scoff at King’s words as too mild and unrealistic. They point to examples such as Sherman’s March of destruction during the American Civil War and the United States’ attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II in order to argue that peace was eventually established through destruction. By condoning the violence and focusing solely on the end result of peace from the winner’s perspective, the individuals who argue this point do not consider the long-term ramifications of their actions, many of which could have been avoided. I understand that sometimes drastic measures may be necessary, but they should only be attempted when all other peaceful options have been exhausted, rather than start with such violence. In most situations people face, a peaceful interaction produces the best results. Hostility, rebellion, secrecy, distrust, and numerous other negative consequences of a non-peaceful approach can be replaced by amiability, cooperation, openness, trust, and other positive results.

We, as a house united, must find within ourselves the willingness to compromise rather than resort to creating a schism with antagonizing sides with the mindset of defeating each other rather than addressing the problem that all sides want to remedy. We must not forget what the real objective is. When we focus on a relationship marred by an unwillingness to find common ground, we use that much less energy in fixing the problem. We all want a better idea, a better way, a better world . . . but what is really accomplished if one side finally reaches what they believe is the solution, only to look back and see a trail of tears dotted with hostility and covered by the stormy clouds of a house divided? Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this viewpoint and made certain to remind us not to forget the values and principles that bring us much happiness and success as we venture forth for something more.

It is up to my generation to spread King’s description of peace as a vehicle for greatness to the minds of all people. We must relay the facts of history that depict how a peaceful disagreement provides a much better outcome than the scratching of a line on the floor to divide the house. If we shut each other out, we can never know how much better the solution to the problem could have been if we had opened ourselves for constructive criticism from differing, yet respectful, viewpoints. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. states that “Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.” I wholeheartedly agree but feel compelled to make the addendum that peace is not merely a nicety that we can consider, but a necessity that we must strive for in order to bring the world together as a house united.

Samarth could be the poster boy for the American Dream: The son of Indian parents who emigrated to the United States by way of Canada (where Samarth
was born), he is a National Merit Finalist with several doors open (Vanderbilt and Notre Dame among them) for pursuing a degree in actuarial science. I would have thought Samarth would feel like a fish out of water in southern Indiana after five years of living outside Detroit, where his family relocated when Samarth was two. He is well aware that he’s Brown in a sea of White; however, that difference has not affected him adversely. He has never felt discriminated against, saying that Castle is “a very caring community. We don’t make assumptions based on where you’re from, skin color, ethnicity of any sort. When you come in, you’re a student and you display who you are. Everyone gets a chance.” Indeed, the existence of the school’s Club EQUAL (“Everyone’s Qualities Understood And Loved”), whose motto is “Respecting ourselves by recognizing our similarities and celebrating our differences,” seems to support this ethos of care. But I wonder whether or to what extent Samarth might be living in an AP bubble that insulates him from the realities of his less advantaged peers.

But Samarth doesn’t come across as a bubble boy. Even though his essay doesn’t draw from local issues he personally experienced or witnessed, he was inspired by national incidents, most notably the 2016 election. Whether Samarth’s other-centeredness is a result of his diverse experiences growing up, good parenting, teachers such as Mr. Bracher who have challenged him to consider larger social issues, and/or just an inherently thoughtful nature, it is authentic. It is evident in his impassioned call for compromise, his MLK-inspired understanding that peace is a process rather than an outcome, and his acceptance of his responsibility on behalf of his generation to pay forward that peaceful methodology. But even if I weren’t convinced by his essay—I could cynically surmise that any AP student knows how to write to an intended audience—his affect during our Skype session provided corroborating evidence. His warm eyes, listening stance, and thoughtful responses radiated nice kid.

I have long thought that the yin-yang relationship between good and evil in this world has, on balance, heavily favored evil. But my belief that the power of good outweighs evil has given me cause for hope that good can and will prevail. Glimpses into the lives of good people such as Samarth and Fred—pockets of possibility amplified by their small but persistent presence everywhere—affirms that hope. I really wanted to close with something other than Michael Jackson, but “We Are the World” has insistently, cheesily been in my head while writing this editorial. Cue the music: “Let’s realize that a change can only come / When we stand together as one.”
Notes

1. Yes, you read correctly: Indiana calls their public school districts corporations. Even after 11 years in the state, I still experience a hitch every time I say or write the term.

2. Indiana 10th graders in the year of transition (Spring 2016) were required to take the full battery of both the ECAs (as a graduation requirement) and the new ISTEP (as a school/teacher accountability requirement). Having served on the committee convened to recommend cut scores for the ELA portion of the ISTEP, I have an insider’s perspective on the disparity between the students’ scores on the two tests. At Castle, for example, only 16.2 percent of students did not pass the ELA ECA; 50.8 percent did not pass the ELA ISTEP. The ISTEP is significantly more rigorous, which is the most obvious explanation for the difference. But my fellow committee members—many of them teachers who had administered both tests—spoke to the issue of testing burnout. Students’ scores on the ISTEP had no bearing on them personally, so it seems reasonable to assume they put less effort into it.

3. The distinction between “effective” and “highly effective” ratings has proven to be a challenge for Indiana administrators, given the subjective components of the teacher assessment tool and questionable validity of student performance data that can swing scores one way or the other on any given year. Principals in the corporations [shudder] in my neck of the woods have decided not to differentiate merit pay between the two ratings, which has helped to alleviate bad feeling among their faculty. I asked Fred what Warrick does with respect to this issue, thinking that nearly 61 percent of highly effective teachers might represent a significant expenditure for the school. He said the only distinction between the two ratings is $1.00.

4. Small world: Fred knows sj Miller, the erstwhile coeditor of English Education, from their mutual work as AP graders.

5. See http://www.in.gov/mlkihc/2552.htm for contest details.

References


Tara Star Johnson is editor of English Education. An associate professor of English education at Purdue University, she can be reached at tarastar@purdue.edu.

Samarth Sheth is a senior at Castle High School in Newburgh, Indiana. He is student council senior class president, captain of the Math Academic Team, and an IASP-designated Indiana Academic All-Star. Sheth will be pursuing an actuarial science degree at the University of Evansville and plans to work toward an MBA degree. He can be reached at samarthsheth017@gmail.com.