

# My Dreams Are Not A Secret

## Teenagers in Metropolitan Detroit Speak Out

Going public with personal experiences involving race is something many adults avoid as they squirm over the correct words and being placed in a perceived no-win situation. So what makes 13 Detroit area teens of African, Asian, European, Latin American and Middle Eastern descent write so candidly about ethnicity, discrimination and their segregated world?

As participants in the Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity program, a University of Michigan project funded by The Skillman Foundation, they've discovered their voice, along with an understanding of their identities and a willingness to bring positive messages on diversity issues to their homes, schools and friends.

My Dreams are not a Secret: Teenagers in Metropolitan Detroit Speak Out, an anthology published by Next Generation Press, the publishing arm of What Kids Can Do, Inc., shares the narratives and poems of a group of talented young writers who have participated in the Youth Dialogues research project led by U-M's Barry Checkoway and Roger Fisher.

*As a young child, my mother would repeatedly refer to me as an endangered species. What did she actually mean by this?*

-- Excerpted from "An Endangered Species," by Mychael Fields, Southfield Lathrup High School '07

This opening contribution illustrates the awakening senses of identity that flow throughout *My Dreams are not a Secret*. Mychael Fields reveals his mother's prophecy and pride that her son would grow up to be an intelligent, successful and respectful Black man, and pays tribute to his father, Christopher, who, in his son's words, "grew into the epitome of what a Black father should be."

In this collection of 21 works, emotional passages emerge from teens growing up in a chronically segregated region that is mired in a devastating and persistent economic recession. The excitement and commitment reflected in the voices of those from the most isolated and disadvantaged neighborhoods are among the most intense.

"For people who live in deep segregation, this is an opportunity for them to truly connect with those who are different. They find it fascinating and wonderful and they want more of it," says Checkoway. "When I observe this program's participants together in a room ... it looks to me like a world that does not exist yet."

*Can you see my birthmark, sarcasm, attitude, intelligence, underwear? Can you see my faith, talents, love, thoughts, dreams, or insecurities?*

-- From "Can You See Me," a collaborative poem by the Detroit Youth Writers

The Youth Dialogues program dismantles barriers of segregation in ways that seem simple and obvious, but they are new experiences to many participants. A metropolitan tour becomes an adventure to those who have never seen contiguous areas. Social gatherings offer a chance to meet people under other conditions.

*Walking across my bridge can take you miles away from where you are. Each of my limbs connects worlds that would most likely never cross each other.*

-- Excerpted from "Walk Across Me" by Jacqueline Robinson

"We close the program with a residential retreat in which participants live and work together. Many of these young people have never slept under one roof with those from a different background," explains Checkoway. Lasting relationships are formed, and some

remain with the program to serve on the Youth Policy Leadership Group, working on issues of segregation as they travel to schools, Lansing and Washington, D.C. to present their findings.

*A program like Youth Dialogues isn't for everyone. It's for the open-armed, the energetic, and the hopeful.*

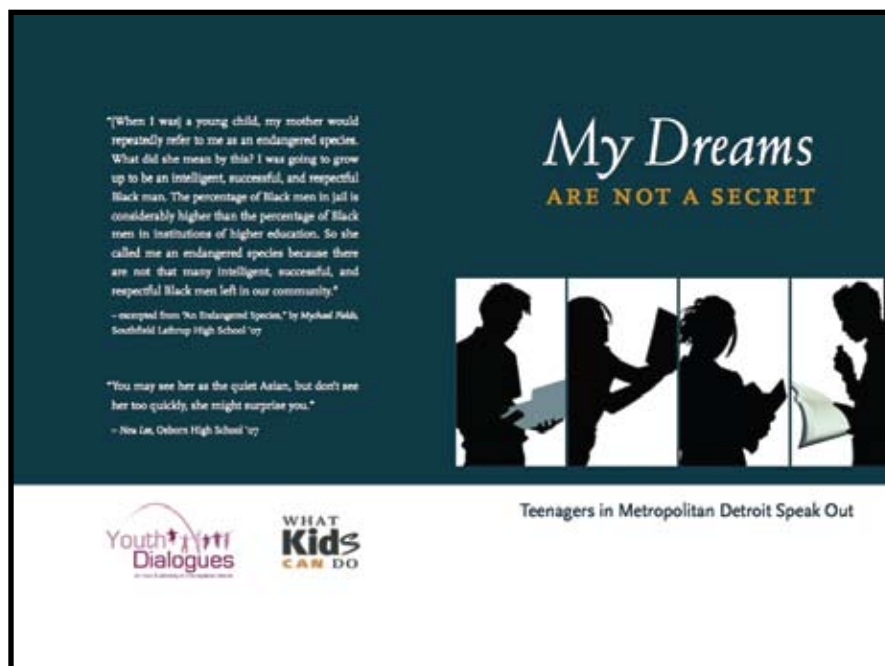
-- Excerpted from "Clairborn," by Devin Polaski, St. Clair High School, about the unity of white students from his school with an Arab American group from Edsel Ford in Dearborn.

Why should schools and governments care? "They are not necessarily prepared for the changes because they don't have experience in having a conversation with people that are different from themselves. There's no reason to expect that it's just going to happen on its own. We need to have facilitation of this transformation or our diverse democracy will really be limited," says

Checkoway. He adds that businesses are searching for a diverse workforce but can't always find it. Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity could also be viewed as part of the solution to concerns about the ability to train and retain young people who are committed to the region.

"We are preparing young people to be a new generation of civic leaders who understand that we need to recognize differences and build bridges and unity across those differences to adjust to the workforce of the future."

Within the Detroit metropolitan area, Checkoway points to micro-scale environments that are growing in diversity. Farmington Hills, Southfield and Dearborn are among the communities that have welcomed social, racial and cultural differences in their populations.



**KIDS MATTER HERE:**

The Skillman Foundation's Good Neighborhoods is a 10-year \$100-million program that provides full-scale support to six Detroit neighborhoods where 65,000 children live.

***I'm not blind to the fact that the world is quickly becoming a place of fear and doubt, but I am one who is willing to change all that.***

—Excerpted from “Breaking the Mold,” by Erika Vivyan, Harrison High School, Farmington Hills.  
Change, even when it is necessary and inevitable, invariably meets with resistance. The attitudes and habits of

adults accustomed to living in a segregated area will be a factor. Checkoway acknowledges that such obstacles may slow progress on diversity issues and impede our ability to adapt to a changing world.

“Young people embrace this idea of diversity,” says Checkoway. “It’s very natural to them. I fear that we have such divisions in our adult society that the nastiness of

those divisions will frustrate efforts by young people to accomplish their goals. Hate crimes typically come from adults that are being displaced. As the population of our society is transformed, adults will not change easily. Young people are arising but they still operate in a context of adults.”

The publication of *My Dreams are not a Secret* is one of the three major ways that the Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity project is being spotlighted. In partnership with the Mosaic Youth Theatre, diversity-themed words and stories are featured in the stage production “Speak for Yourself!,” which has been performed at 75 local school assemblies and community centers, and a nine-episode series is in the works for broadcast on public television.

Checkoway advocates the spread of courses on the benefits of diversity to the curriculum in schools, in after-school activities and its extension to established institutions like churches, as well. Although significant changes are taking place, he acknowledges that it’s going to take a generation for us to begin seeing major changes with our institutions as a result of the commitment by young people.

“There are some true heroes in everyday life who are 14, 15, 16 years old,” says Checkoway. “They’re the ones I choose as my heroes ... exceptional young people that really want to create social change.”

The local teens who speak out in *My Dreams are not a Secret* are a reminder to adults who have lived their entire lives in one of America’s most segregated urban areas that they don’t have to live that way. They bring hope, fearlessness and a provocative challenge. And they bring wisdom that transcends ethnic, cultural, social and even generational differences.

***If I could do anything, I would have learned to forgive at an earlier age. My dreams have a heartbeat, and they are thousands of years old.***

—From “My Dreams Are Not a Secret,” a collaborative poem by the Detroit Youth Writers.



*Metro-Detroit youth who participated in the Youth Dialogues project, and have dreams to share.*



*Mosaic’s “Speak for Yourself!” being performed by members. A series is in the works for a public television broadcast.*



*“Young people embrace this idea of diversity,” says Professor Barry Checkoway, co-author of My Dreams are Not Secret.*

More information about  
Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity  
and copies of  
*My Dreams Are Not a Secret*  
are available by  
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Learn more about the Skillman Foundation and its Good Neighborhoods program at [www.skillman.org](http://www.skillman.org)