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There is no doubt that ELI has provided a strong foundation of principles upon which I will shape my character for the rest of my life. Both the classroom sessions and my individual project enabled me to step out of my bounds and explore myself in unfamiliar surroundings. Both environments forced me to take risks, to try new things, and to keep going even when things didn't go right the first time. However, I have developed much more personally in the group atmosphere than individually.

Dr. Natalie Cumberlander and Dr. Colby Cohen-Archer from the Counseling and Testing Center facilitated our sessions for one week in February. They presented a very controversial workshop, which they entitled, "Appreciating Diversity." For two days, I listened as my classmates debated certain issues involving minorities—and that day I found *myself* to be in the minority. I grew up in a very traditional home, but I've had the opportunity to travel and to experience situations that some people may never experience in a lifetime. I had a very different perspective from those around me.

Some of the activities and exercises they used were helpful. The very first one, where the men entered the room first and sat down in chairs as we all watched the women enter, take off their shoes, and kneel at the man's feet, caused an uproar among several of my classmates. My perceptions were much more neutral than everyone else's. It didn't even occur to me that one sex was being honored over the other. I wasn't angry or resentful because the women were on the ground; I was just patiently waiting for someone to tell me why so that I might be able to understand. I wasn't filled with accusations or misgivings—I was filled with questions.

That week many of us left feeling angry or violated, myself included, but it forced us to be aware of the differences between our personal experiences. I didn't feel that I better understood other cultures, which is what I had hoped for, but I learned more about myself than I had expected. I learned that there is probably no one else who feels the way I do about this issue—but I now understand the reason for that. No one has grown up in the environment I have, no one has had the same experiences I've had, and no one has the exact same beliefs that I do. That fact is true for everyone; we are all very different.

After that session, I found myself loosening up a bit more. Before, I wasn't teachable—my cup was full (in other words, I thought I already knew it all). After what had happened in that classroom during those two days, I realized that I had so much to learn—and who better to learn it from than the people around me, sitting in my class, driven by the same common purpose of learning how we can improve our character and change our community by empowering others to do the same? I began to become a more teachable participant—instead of always talking and contributing ideas, I listened to others speak and evaluated their ideas. I was eager to listen to those of a different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or geographical background than me, because I knew that their experiences were much different than mine. What better way is there to learn about a culture, or a person for that matter, than to listen to them talk about themselves—their ideas, their goals, and their dreams?

It was Dr. Cumberlander's and Dr. Cohen-Archer's intention that week for us to better understand and better appreciate those around us who were of a minority. I think I missed that mark—instead, I just learned to appreciate all who are different from me—

whether they are a minority or not. I learned to value the experiences of others and what lessons they had to offer my life.

Now, instead of being resentful and frustrated at those people who don't understand me or at those I don't understand, I am able to step back and assess the situation. I no longer turn a mute ear to what they have to say—I am eager to listen to them because they have so much to offer. I don't hesitate to try to talk to people of a different background from myself—I find that often they can provide me with some of the most profound, introspective advice I could ever receive.

From now on, I intend to involve those of a different background in what I am doing in my life. Whether it is an organization at school, a committee at church, or a task force at work, I intend to involve those whose vantage points are contrast to mine and I will continue to seek the counsel of all different types of people from all over the world. Variety is the spice of life—and I hope to have a variety of people that influence me in a variety of ways as I make my way into the future.

Probably the most important lesson I've learned from that session is that I can be involved. I don't have to be black to befriend an African-American; I don't have to be born in China to work alongside a person of Chinese descent. I shall endeavor to do my part in breaking down the diversity barrier by developing relationships based on mutual trust and respect with people that don't necessarily share my opinions and my values. My goal is to find many "flavors" of people to spice up my life—and hopefully I'll be able to spice up theirs as well. No matter where we're from or where we're going, we are united by one absolute truth—we are all human. We are born, and then sooner or later we die.

But it's what we do in the middle that counts—so we might as well do it together, as friends.