

Strategies for Youth

# 2019 YOUTH VOICES

CONTEST WINNER

## Keyma Flight, Age 17

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The video gained a million views in a week. A girl, not even over five feet, getting hit and tackled by a hundred-and-seventy pound police officer at my school. The next day after it happened, I heard two teachers chatting about it in the hall.

"He didn't deserve being fired. Bad things shouldn't happen to good people," one of them said.

I wanted to interject. He hit the girl. I should be sticking up for the officer, Sam, seeing as how he was my uncle and all, but I just couldn't shake the idea of him punching a ninety-pound sophomore. Straight in the eye. But I kept moving to the last class of the day.

As I entered, I saw Julius at the front of the class. The class—even Mr. Fox—were quiet and intently listening.

"So yeah," Julius said, "my sister is okay. No stitches or nothin'. She'll be back Friday to get her work so y'all can see her then." He sat down and Mr. Fox went to the front.

"Thanks for the update Julius. Originally, you all had an essay due for Monday about *Invisible Man* but....I think, given the current events of our school, I want to change up the prompt. So, due Friday is a *letter* to a police officer. At three to five *good* paragraphs. This is very freelance. Tell them what they should know about the youth, and how to improve interactions between the two," Mr. Fox said. A student raised their hand.

"You think they were right for firing Officer Sam?" she asked.

"Well, no," Mr. Fox said, "He's always done his job right in the few years he's been here. An....unruly student shouldn't have cost him his job." Breath seemed to

leave the class as everyone inhaled sharply and looked at Julius. He seemed calm, but the eyes on him almost forced him to react to the comment.

"My sister ain't unruly. The dude gave her a black eye," Julius said.

"What more can an officer do than subdue, Julius? If the teacher and school continued to allow behavior like that, imagine how many more disrespectful students we'd have. I've been in inner city schools, I know how much damage kids can do." It didn't seem like Julius wanted to continue but the eyes seemed more intense, almost begging for an explosion.

"What? Inner city? So 'cause my sister black she deserves to get hit? Funny thing is we aren't even from the inner city. That was straight up racist," Julius said. I felt like I was suffocating.

"No, factual. Inner city children, regardless of race..." Mr. Fox was interrupted by Julius storming off into the hall. I breathed out slowly, afraid for Julius, Mr. Fox, and my school. The atmosphere didn't feel the same. The morning announcements started with our principal sounding ashamed and frustrated. Some kids got suspended after a debate turned into a fist-fight. I didn't speak much. The video of my uncle punching, slapping, hitting, whatever-anyone-on-the-internet-deciding, a girl no taller than his shoulder was looping online, and in my head. After apologizing to the world all day, ("Is your uncle racist?" "Do you like police?") I'd have to go home and apologize even more to my uncle for being the one apologizing ("It's not your job to answer them." "You don't have to feel bad.").

Class ended and I made my way to the bus stop. Usually Uncle Sam drives me home but today I had to take a two-hour bus ride home. As I entered my house door, I saw him sitting on the couch with a singular lamp on and the tv on Fox news. He was holding a family photo in his hands and rubbing his eyes. As he looked up at me, I saw red eyes. The night of the incident, I heard constant shuffling in his room. I woke up to my uncle's face being on the national news. Either he never turned the television off or the minute he turned it back on, covering him. He showed me the photo of my mixed-race family smiling. I looked more brown than ever in that photo, but never noticed it until today.

"I've never seen a family so divided," Uncle Sam said, "How was school?" I sat next to him. "Yeah, long day I'm sure. Is...is Gia okay?" The girl whose brown skin is now marked purple. I turned my attention to the television.

"I mean, he *automatically* perceived that little black girl as a threat. No man of character—of color—would do that," said a man with a booming voice. I turned off the tv to hear my Uncle Sam sobbing.

"I-I wanted...I'm not sure what I wanted. She said she had a knife under her breath. She said, 'back up before I stab you' and I reacted. As quick as I could. Maybe....maybe it wasn't the best thing to hit her but my God I had to react! Right?"

My brother barely wants me in his house and I've got these...weirdos praising me for hitting her online. What should I have done?" I patted his back while he weeped a bit more. After he finished, he went to bed. I got my laptop and opened it up. I started typing:

*Dear America. Dear Police officers. Dear Mr. Fox. Dear Uncle Sam,*

*This generation is more earthquake than children. With all the identities being thrown at us, it's hard not to be 'unruly'. I don't think we blame fault lines for opening up when provoked. I do not know what makes a student disruptive in class. I don't think anyone advocates for that, though. We youth have to be peer and president in the same step. We have to suppress our 'special snowflake' labels while also being told to be unique. Unique feels forced. Feels less soft snow and more hail storm. Feels like slipping but not being allowed to blame the ice, only our feet for betraying us.*

*The youth today are made up of glass girls who are supposed to be fragile and resistant. Of paper-boat boys who race against Noah's Ark. It's not easy to wake up battling depression and anxiety at higher rates than it's ever been then coming to school where the biggest war is with the people who are supposed to stand for us. I've seen children be bullied right in front of a teacher and the teacher say nothing. I've seen teachers with a savior complex bully any student who didn't praise them. This is all to say; we don't know if our authority protects us anymore. From teachers, to staff, to the police this trust feels like a God we never prayed for.*

*The system should not be made to scare us. Should not be made to make us feel in line. My Uncle Sam is a police officer. My Uncle Sam hit a girl, with is authoritative fist in her unauthoritative face. My Uncle Sam said she had a knife. I think he lied. I think gaslighting is a common thing in American culture that trickled into the executive system. Now we don't know if we were pushed into the ring of fire or if we jumped but someone is still burning. From kids in the 1805s to a city in 2015.*

*I didn't ask to be an activist. But I didn't ask to be oppressed for my skin tone either. I think I'd take the former any day. I don't think I'd call myself an activist for writing this. For asking for kids to be kids. But it feels like I have to be in order to tell me teachers, parents, police officers that I deserve to feel human and not a chain in the system. I heard someone say, "Why do bad things happen to good people?". I think the real question is: why wouldn't they? Being good doesn't exclude consequence. Students are taught this in kindergarten. So where did the teachings go?*

*My teacher tells me to write to a police officer about today's youth. But for once, I'd like to see an officer writing, visiting, talking to the youth. Unfiltered and morals over code. I'd like to not feel like an activist for once. But a person. ■*

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