

The March On Washington's Influence On Me

"You don't consider yourself black?" My dad posed this question to me with confusion in his tone. My mom is white and my dad is black. In my mind, that makes me mixed race, but my dad grew up in the 1960's and 70's, a time where even a drop of African American blood meant you were black. It never occurred to him that I wouldn't identify that way. On the rare occasion that I do consider my race, I don't think of myself as African American, but current events in America have forced me to take a closer look at what my parents and grandparents faced in the past. If I could experience any event to better understand what they went through, it would be the March on Washington on August 27, 1963.

The stories of racism I hear from my parents' generation are almost unimaginable in their blatant discrimination. People forbidden to marry based on race; children prevented from playing together; segregation in schools, businesses, and even churches: it seems inconceivable to a child of the 21st century. But I study all these things because it's important to understand how I might have been treated a few decades ago. In the March on Washington, the leaders in Washington D.C. took precautions because they predicted mass arrests, injuries from riots, and danger to the city's citizens. Those suspicions were founded not on precedent by former events, but on the assumption that black people couldn't gather without violence. Clearly, deeply rooted racism poisoned the minds of the American people in the 1960's.

One of the most important tips for conflict resolution is to give everyone an equal chance to speak out. If I had participated in the March on Washington, I would have wanted to

interview the people whose voices were being silenced by the prejudice of the era. The March on Washington itself was revolutionary in allowing black people to influence the thinking of white Americans, but no women were allowed to give official speeches at the event (although Josephine Baker and Daisy Bates were allowed to speak briefly), and the youngest speaker, John Lewis, was 23. I want to know what the children and teenagers participating in the event thought of it, and how being a young person of color influenced them. I want to hear about the experiences of black women in an age where they were doubly oppressed because of both their race and their gender. Although the March on Washington allowed white people to hear black people's voices, I want to know what those too suppressed to speak would have said if they could.

Why should I care about these painful events? Why does it matter to me what young people and women of color thought, or that generations before me were oppressed? The race relations in modern America, although improved from the 1960's, are controversial and often heartbreaking. It makes me angry that I have to be afraid for my father's life because of the color of his skin, but I also sympathize with the families of slain police officers who were killed because a person of color thought they were entitled to take someone's life because of injustices done to their people. Being a part of the March on Washington would open my eyes to ways I can adjust my own attitudes toward both white people and people of color, and how I can work with others toward a solution to modern-day prejudice instead of being part of the problem.

The March on Washington was one of the first steps in a push for complete equality that is still unfinished. The lessons I could learn from it and the experiences I could take away from it would help shape my view of America's future. But since I cannot live through it

myself, my most important tasks are to listen to those who were there, to recognize how blessed I am to have insight from my elders on race relations in their day, and to do my best to achieve the equality they were striving for.