

Dear Sylvanie Williams,

As I sit down to write this letter to you, I can't help but feel overwhelmed by the weight of history and the countless struggles that have taken place over the past century. From the civil rights movement to the suffrage movement, the fight for justice and equality has been long and difficult, but your legacy and the work of so many other courageous activists have paved the way for progress.

You were the first African-American principal in the New Orleans public school system. When your school was burned down, you walked on, unfazed, and rebuilt it. You also worked tirelessly to ensure women got the right to vote. Inspired by you and others, newer generation of leaders has stepped up to carry the torch.

One of the key figures is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I really wish that you could have seen his "I Have a Dream" speech. Although he sacrificed himself for civil rights and the conscience of our country long before I was born, I had the fortune to hear the recording. When his deep voice reached me talking "[people] will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... join hands ... as sisters and brothers," I was instantly filled with hope and joy. Were those pictures also in your mind when you fought for equality? Please be assured our country has gone a long way towards this vision!

We passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, paving the way for greater political and social equality for all minorities. Women have also made great strides, with equal voting rights and many holding positions of power and influence. Similarly, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 continued towards equality by prohibiting sex discrimination in education. Furthermore, we have seen the first African-American president, Barack Obama, the first African-American woman Supreme Court judge, Ketanji Brown Jackson, and a host of other "firsts" that shattered barriers.

Even with so many achievements and progress, we still have work to do. During 2021, when a new pandemic was at its full height, Asian hate also skyrocketed. Once I was walking with my mother, two people who were driving slowed down to yell out racist rants and things like "go home" "out of the country". When it happened, my heart stopped and I heard a deafening roar in my ears. I felt my heart thudding against my chest as I realized that I was frozen in fear. My mind raced with thoughts of retaliation but my body couldn't move. I was overwhelmed with a mix of emotions - rage, fear, confusion, and even embarrassment. Did I do something wrong? "NO" I quickly told myself. It is MY home. THEY were the ones discriminating against me, not the other way around. And I also realized they actually knew they were cowards, as I noticed when they left, they really rushed, leaving with the screechy-tire sound I still remember today.

With a surge of strength and power, I knew I had to do something – my mom and I participated in a Seattle protest against Asian Hate. I walked along with my head held high, knowing that my presence was important. I was heartened that so many people, African-American, White, Asian,

and Latino had come forward together. We were marching for justice, equality, and a better future together.

So, where do we stand now as a nation? I can tell you proudly that we have made tremendous, tremendous progress, even though we could still do better. And, we will do better!

As I look to the future, I am reminded of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." While progress may sometimes be slow, and setbacks may occur, I believe that we will continue to make progress for justice and equality for all, building on the legacy and work of trailblazing activists like yourself. Thank you for your incredible contributions to education and civil rights in our country. And, thank you for inspiring people to continue the battle against inequality. Most importantly, thank you for unlocking in me, and maybe countless others what we never knew we possessed: hidden under a shy exterior, an inner strength, and the willingness to fight for what is right. Your spirit will continue to light on us, and we will continue the fight!

Sincerely,

Benjamin Wu