

The Listen Up Project presents:

BLACK VOICES *of Vermont*



Featuring:



Elyse Martin-Smith

What's it like to be a teenager in Vermont right now? How does your racial identity impact your experience?

Elyse: I have often felt different than my peers, which has made it difficult for me to form connections or feel that my voice is heard. However, I have felt more connected to my identity than ever by the sense of unity that has come after the recent protests and unrest. Throughout my high school experience, I have grown so much and have learned to speak out against injustice and form meaningful relationships. As I grow and learn more about myself, I am becoming more and more confident in my racial identity.

What does centering and celebrating Blackness mean to you?

Elyse: In order to celebrate blackness, we must work to understand it and its complexity and beauty. There are so many parts of blackness that are often overlooked. Personally, I experience many privileges because of my lighter complexion. Colorism is a part of blackness and race that is often not talked about. Celebrating blackness means being aware of colorism, educating others on the history of BIPOC in our country, and seeking and amplifying black voices of color.

Who are your role models? From whom do you draw strength?

Elyse: Personally, I do not like choosing one singular role model because I feel that I admire specific characteristics of many people instead of idolizing one person because nobody is perfect. However, Michelle Obama has been a role model for me because of her strength in her unique journey to power. I am also extremely passionate about policy changes and Ibram X. Kendi, the author of *How to be an Anti-Racist*, has inspired me to continue to pursue policy changes. One quote of his that I really identify with is *Racial inequity is a problem of bad policy, not bad people*. In general, people of color have so much to offer and these role models have made a huge impact in my life, even though there are not many people of color in my close community.

What can the state of Vermont do to actively support young Black Vermonters?

Elyse: Listen and seek diverse perspectives. As seen over the summer through the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the horrific murder of George Floyd, many young people of color have strong voices that yearn to be heard. One thing that I am passionate about is school curriculum reform by requiring more ethnic studies education at all levels. I am also interested in increasing youth voice within Vermont legislature by helping draft a bill with the Vermont After School organization. In order to make young people of color feel at home in Vermont, we must increase representation at all levels.

Share a story about your life that feels important, or that has made you who you are?

Elyse: As a mixed person, I have had a big struggle with my racial identity throughout my life. I constantly questioned myself, asking am I black enough? Am I white enough? Am I enough?

For the longest time, I had hoped to take a DNA test. As someone who was adopted at birth, an ancestral DNA test has always seemed like a magic wand that could solve all of my uncertainty and my lack of confidence in my identity. When I turned 16, I finally got the chance to take a DNA test and I was so excited. Once I opened my results, I expected pixie dust to fly everywhere and fireworks to explode... but there was nothing. Nothing but a list of percentages. Race is a social construct, with a definition that has been manipulated to benefit those in power. But what does it mean to me? Being a part of my school's Racial Alliance Committee and working to raise the Black Lives Matter flag gave me the power to be confident in myself. I can't believe that I thought that spitting in a tube would bring me magic, because the real magic was within me the whole time.