

Personal, Background, and Future Goals Statement

Growing up in Hallsville, a small town in East Texas, I was nurtured by a community where life revolved around church, high school football, and the gentle hum of small-town gossip. With a population barely surpassing 2,400, we had just one gas station, a pizza shop, four churches and a donut store within one Main St. The internet was sporadic at best, and television channels were limited; when a TV worked, it was turned on to football or FOX news. But it was the racial divisions that went unspoken that left the deepest impact. A census notes that 81% of residents were white, with the rest divided evenly between Black and Hispanic people. Two adopted Chinese girls and a Pakistani family running the local gas station were the only exceptions. There was an unwritten rule: white people hung out with white people, and the same applied to Hispanic and black communities. Even our churches were separated by race. This was the world I belonged to for the first 15 years of my life.

In Hallsville, the grip of xenophobia and radical conservatism was palpable. Church played a central role in our lives; Sunday mornings, evenings, and Wednesday nights were spent at the chapel where everyone gathered to reaffirm their faith not just in religious doctrine, but also in the extreme conservative values that permeated our community. The teachings of the church were deeply intertwined with daily life, influencing everything from our education to our social interactions. An example that stands out vividly is from my high school years when the state-mandated biology curriculum included a chapter on evolution. Rather than teach this chapter, my biology teacher took an entire week off from school to avoid contradicting "God's word."

These conservative values were not confined to the church; they found a place in my own home. My father, a staunch and radical conservative, contributed significantly to the misinformation and biases that I held. His beliefs, often rooted in fear and skepticism of the unfamiliar, fueled my early apprehensions and unease when encountering individuals from different backgrounds or cultures. The conservative ideals prevalent in my community were pervasive, shaping my worldview and reinforcing the divide that separated us, the good people, from those who did not share our beliefs, the bad ones.

However, at the age of 15, my father's job led us to move to Dallas, where I enrolled in Trinity High School. The contrast was stark, akin to stepping from one world into another. I distinctly recall my first day in our new Dallas home when I saw a woman wearing a hijab walking down the street. Despite myself, I was struck by an unfamiliar and unsettling sensation: fear. But what was I afraid of?

This fear, as I would later come to realize, was not innate but a product of the racist and deeply biased views that I held. The conservative values and rigid beliefs that once dictated my every action had instilled in me a sense of apprehension towards anything or anyone that deviated from the familiar. It was as if a curtain had been drawn back, revealing the shadows of prejudice and intolerance that had been cast upon me. The woman in the hijab became a symbol of the unknown, a clear contrast to the homogeneous environment I had grown up in. Little did I know that this moment would serve as a catalyst for profound change in my perspective and worldview.

The transformation continued when I stepped into my first-period class at Trinity, my new high school and the most diverse school in Texas. It was the first time I had ever found myself as the sole white person in a room. The statistics of Trinity painted a picture of a vastly different world: Trinity had a white population of only 31% among its 2,600 students (more students attended Trinity than every person that lived in Hallsville). The initial days at this school were lonely and bewildering. I struggled to navigate a milieu that was the polar opposite of Hallsville's familiar racial divides. While once unwritten rules defined who you could associate with, now everyone mingled freely. The barriers that once dictated my every move had inexplicably vanished.

The initial weeks were marked by discomfort, a sense of isolation, and an inability to bridge the cultural gap. One day, though, a pivotal moment occurred. During another solitary lunch where I sat trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, someone placed their tray in front of mine. I looked up and noticed it was a girl from my second period; she was wearing a hijab just like the woman I had seen on my street. She asked my name, and I asked hers. Noor. She asked if we could eat lunch together, as she had noticed my solitude. I told her, a bit apprehensively, yes.

Noor and I ate lunch together every day that week. The next, Noor introduced me to her friends; over the months we formed close bonds that transcended the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and background. My social circle diversified in a way I had never imagined. Among us were individuals from all over the world, each bringing their unique perspectives, traditions, and experiences. It was a kaleidoscope of cultures that, to me, had previously been distant and unknown. As the bonds between us deepened, I found myself not merely an observer but an active participant in their cultures. My Nigerian friend taught me to cook Jollof rice, a spicy dish that, in the beginning, made my eyes water from the heat until I built up a tolerance by attending her family dinners. My Nepali friends, in a generous display of their culture, gifted me a sari and patiently showed me the intricate art of draping it. They even introduced me to dancing to traditional Nepali music, an experience that filled me with a sense of belonging and connection. My Hispanic friends, with warmth and laughter, showed me how to savor tamales (do not eat the corn husk- that is a lesson I learned early on) and took me to the Dia de los Muertos celebrations.

These immersive experiences allowed me to appreciate and embrace cultures that had once felt foreign to me. The initial fear and apprehension I felt during my first weeks at Trinity now seemed like a distant memory. I was profoundly grateful for the opportunity to not only understand but also celebrate the rich tapestry of cultures that had become an integral part of my life. What was once a source of fear had transformed into an endless source of enthusiasm and a genuine desire to learn and engage in these amazing traditions.

Reflecting on my initial days at Trinity now revealed to me a hard and uncomfortable truth - I had held intense biases that were unfounded and the product of fear. I had been coached from birth to believe that anyone who differed from the familiar was a potential danger. This revelation was an awakening, one that forced me to confront the ugliness of prejudice I had unwittingly carried with me. It was a difficult acknowledgment that I had been complicit in perpetuating stereotypes and discrimination against people who were, in reality, no different from me in their hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

As I engaged with cultures and communities different from my own, I began to recognize the depth of my ignorance and the privilege that I had simply by existing in a predominantly white society. It was a humbling experience to understand that there were aspects of the world that I would never fully comprehend as a white person. This realization wasn't a source of despair but an impetus for growth. I started diversifying my information streams and seeking out intentional conversations with people whose perspectives were radically different from mine. I devoured literature and documentaries that shed light on the experiences of marginalized communities, delving into the histories and struggles that had shaped their lives. I actively sought out opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogues with individuals who had lived through hardships and challenges I could never fathom. These conversations were transformative, as they allowed me to hear firsthand accounts of the systemic injustices and prejudices faced by people of color, immigrants, and various marginalized groups.

Through these intentional efforts, I began to grasp the profound impact of bias and discrimination on individuals and communities. I came to understand that my privilege allowed me to walk through life with a set of advantages that many others did not share. It became clear that addressing biases was not

merely an abstract concept but a moral imperative. This realization fueled my determination to not only confront my own biases but also to actively work towards dismantling the systems that perpetuated them. It was during this process of self-transformation that I began to see a striking parallel between my personal journey and the challenges faced by artificial intelligence. AI, like me, is shaped by the data it is trained on, limited to the knowledge and experiences it is provided. My upbringing in Hallsville was an environment that subtly ingrained biases in me, much like how AI can inherit and perpetuate biases from its training data. These biases can affect everything from recommendation algorithms to decision-making processes found in hospital rooms and courthouses. Like me, AI can be susceptible to the prejudices that lurk within the data it learns from. But unlike humans, AI lacks the capacity for self-reflection and self-correction. It depends on us, as its creators and stewards, to recognize and address the biases it inherits.

This realization has ignited my passion for researching and developing AI systems that are not only technically proficient but also ethically sound. I am deeply committed to the notion that AI, like me, can learn to overcome its biases and contribute positively to society. This commitment is rooted in the understanding that biased AI can perpetuate discrimination, reinforce stereotypes, and exacerbate societal inequalities. We've seen instances where AI-driven algorithms have been biased against certain racial or gender groups, leading to unfair outcomes in areas such as hiring, lending, and criminal justice.

My own journey of self-discovery has made me acutely aware of the harm that biases can inflict, and I am resolute in my mission to ensure that AI is developed and deployed responsibly. This means actively working to identify and rectify biases in AI systems, designing robust ethical frameworks, and promoting transparency and accountability in the development and deployment of AI technology. Just as I confronted my own biases with introspection and self-improvement, I believe that we must engage in a similar process with AI, continually striving to make it not just technically proficient but also ethically sound, so it can be a force for good in our society.

Upon entering college, my passion for addressing biases and promoting ethical practices in technology led me to delve into research from my freshman year onwards. During freshman year, I collaborated with the Data Analytics department, partnering with a PhD student to develop software capable of detecting Simpson's paradox in datasets. This statistical anomaly, which can be used to manipulate data trends, poses a significant threat in the era of misinformation. Our project aimed to create a defense against such manipulative practices, contributing to the integrity of data-driven decision-making. My sophomore year marked the beginning of my exploration into autonomous driving research, where I focused on object detection technologies. This experience allowed me to delve into the intricacies of machine learning and AI systems applied to real-world problems.

Building on these experiences, my junior and senior years have seen me deeply involved in AI/ML research. I embarked on a personal research initiative centered on using congressional data to predict the outcomes of specific votes through the power of AI. The primary goal of this project is to equip legislators with valuable insights to better navigate the complex landscape of policymaking, assisting them in strategizing and building consensus to achieve their goals.

These research endeavors reflect my unwavering commitment to advancing the field of AI ethics and ensuring that technology serves as a force for good in our society. They underscore my dedication to addressing biases not only on a personal level but also through rigorous academic inquiry and innovation. As I continue to pursue my academic and research journey, my ultimate aim is to contribute to a more equitable and just technological landscape, fostering positive societal impacts and reducing disparities for all.