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Stuck In The Middle

From an outside perspective, a brunette, somewhat popular girl, encapsulates the perfect image of a “well-off” white girl. Any onlooker knows that she comes from a good family, carries herself confidently, and always looks put together in her high-end clothes. Her designer purse has become an extension of her arm. She drives a luxury car and lives in an expensive part of town. But, from the outside looking in, one would not fully grasp the reality of the well-off white girl. Her inner truth reveals that she bought her "high-end" clothes at TJ Maxx for less than half the price. She has never bought clothes that were not on sale. The designer purse she proudly shows off was purchased at a thrift shop. Her luxury car is 15 years old, and she bought it herself off of a used car lot. The house she lives in is a ranch, which just so happens to be one of the smallest among the mansions in the expensive part of town. Being the brunette, somewhat popular girl, I can assure you that perceived notions are not always as they seem. I am from a middle-class family, who happens to reside among upper-class families. Social class inequality is real and is detrimental to society, both physically and mentally.

Childhood ignorance is bliss. Throughout my elementary school years, it seemed like everyone was friends with everyone. No one thought differently of others based on how they looked or what they wore. We all played tag on the playground, laughed together, and probably drove our teachers crazy. In middle school, everything changed. Suddenly, if you did not have a Vera Bradley backpack and matching lunch box, you were not allowed to sit at the same lunch

doings, or was materialism a way to cover insecurities?

In middle school, my family had more to worry about than buying me the newest Vera Bradley set. In sixth grade, my mom lost her job as a marketing director for a dental sales company. It was devastating for my family. My mom and dad did not know how they were going to pay the bills, afford food, Christmas gifts, or even healthcare. My father is self-employed, so her benefits through the company she worked for covered my entire family. Losing benefits and income created a huge stressor for them. I vividly remember my mom being on hold for hours trying to apply for Obamacare for health insurance. She was terrified one of us was going to get sick or injured and that we would have no insurance. Meanwhile, at school, the girls from upper-class families would ask me why I had the same backpack from the year prior. I would lie and say that I did not like any of the new patterns. They viewed and treated me differently. However, no one knew my family was struggling. My mom and dad did everything they could to provide my brother and me with everything we wanted for Christmas that year by putting it on a credit card.

My school district was predominantly children who came from upper-class families, but there was a group of us from middle-class families, as well as a percentage of children from low-income families. Our school's nickname was "the public-private school". We had that reputation because a majority of kids attending had multiple luxury homes, cars, etc. One might think that since our district is spread out across a rather small area, everyone would be in the same social class. But, this was not the case. Low-income families lived in apartments that were walking distance from the million-dollar mansions. Some lower-income children would not eat unless they attended school. At one table, children would be eating school pizza, an apple, with a

and homemade cookies, topped with a note from their mom.

Gregory Mantsios, an expert in Worker Education and Labor Studies, wrote an essay titled “Class In America”. His piece states that the topic of social class is very taboo in the United States. He explores the division of the economy and argues that it creates different social classes, which in turn creates isolation among people in society. The separation of the social class creates social inequality. This inequality is defined as an unequal distribution of resources by some systemic pattern. His article proves that class systemically reproduces itself and that there is a perceived collective consciousness of social class. Some people are ignorant of the issue of social class inequality, and even claim that the United States is “a fundamentally classless society” (Mantsios 1). Mantsios uses the example of three individuals to prove that there are distinct social classes in America. His example shows that the contrast between the rich and the poor is very sharp. Some low-income families rely on the government for their basic needs. On the other hand, there are people with an extreme surplus of money who have never struggled to have their basic needs met. In fact, “ $\frac{1}{3}$ of the US population is living at one extreme or the other and the middle fifth of the population holds less than 4% of the national wealth” (Mantsios 1).

The national scale of the economic spectrum can also be seen on a smaller scale, which proves that social class issues are real. In the small town I was raised in, the upper-class families or, the so-called “one-percenters” of my community's scale, developed a specific attitude and way of life. They evoked my feelings of inferiority all because I could not afford a new Vera Bradley set. They look down on others for not having what they do, even though if we look at the national economic spectrum scale, they realistically are small on the scale compared to the

in upper-class situations and children in middle or lower class situations. Bullying, feelings of inferiority, and lasting psychological impacts were created simply based on materialism and social class.

Mantsios developed four myths which he debunks with realities to prove social class inequality. The first myth states that “... rich or poor, we are all equal in the eyes of the law, and such basic needs as healthcare and education are provided to all regardless of economic standing” (Mantsios 1). In reality, we are not equal. When my mom lost her job, my family, a middle-class family, endured a healthcare gap. Applying to Obamacare was not even guaranteed to our family and was still costly. We do not have free healthcare in America. Basic needs fail to be met for everyone. Not only does social class inequality jeopardize physical health and access to medical care, but it also created a source of anxiety and uncertainty for my parents.

The second myth states that “we are, essentially, a middle-class nation. Despite some variations in economic status, most Americans have achieved relative affluence in what is widely recognized as a consumer society” (Mantsios 1). The children in my school district would beg to differ. If most of our society was at the middle-class level, there would not be children who do not get fed unless they go to school. Everyone would have the same access to success and consumerism if we were all middle class. My small town represents an area of mostly white families, regardless of social class. How do neighborhoods of people of color compare to my small town in regards to social class? The reality is that “the middle class in the United States holds a very small share of the nation's wealth and that share is declining steadily. The gap between the rich and poor and between the rich and the middle class is larger than it has ever been” (Mantsios 1). Once again, social inequality is not allowing equal access to basic needs.

physical and mental health issues because of the harmful effects of societal inequality.

The social class ladder is extremely difficult to climb. The taboo topics of social class and the inequality that comes with it needs to be more openly spoken about to bring it to the attention of those who are ignorant. Social class inequality puts children and their families' mental and physical well-being at risk. From my personal account, being stuck in the middle class amongst predominantly upper-class community has allowed me to have more respect for people and to understand that we are not defined based on our spot on the economic spectrum. Materialism does not define a person's worth. It is essential to understand that people who are struggling may be struggling silently, which is why it is of utmost importance to never assume people's situations. Our national wealth is distributed extremely unequally, but that does not give anyone the right to discriminate against another human being.

Mantsios, Gregory. "Class in America: Myths and Realities" in Colombo, Gary; Cullen, Robert, and Lisle, Bonnie (eds.). *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*. New York: Bedford Books, 1992.