

## **United We Stand**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "I have a dream that one day...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers." Today that dream can be a reality. Not just for a white teenager from the state Dr. King once called "a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression," but for all groups that have been divided by strife: Catholics and Protestants, Israelis and Lebanese, Jews and Gentiles. The power to become a brother or a sister is with the individual, not the group to which he or she belongs. All it takes for this dream to become reality is for people to unite behind a common goal because beyond our race and our religion, we are all human.

In the summer of 2002, the Mississippi Hugh O'Brian Youth (HOBY) Leadership Conference selected me to represent Mississippi at the HOBY World Leadership Congress. The Congress brought together nearly four hundred high school students for a week of leadership education and discussion, culminating with the ratification of a statement on world leadership authored by all the students. Ambassadors represented all fifty states and more than twenty foreign countries. Being from a town of only ten thousand people, I quickly learned what culture shock was. While waiting for my room key, I met students from Alaska and New York; when I opened the door to my room, I introduced myself to students from Vermont, New Jersey, and Taiwan. Already my horizons had expanded miles beyond what I knew, and I had not even begun serious discussions.

The diversity increased when we were split into our discussion groups. My group of about twenty students included Mexicans, Canadians, Catholics, Protestants, Atheists, Southerners, and Yankees. Through the week we spent nearly every waking hour together,

sightseeing, attending seminars, and most of all talking. No matter what topic came up, we were able to discuss it openly. I talked freely about southern race relations with African Americans and Lebanese Americans, about United States international intervention with Liberals and Conservatives, and about economic discrimination with wealthy students and middle class students. Our differences never occurred to us. We were all leaders of tomorrow and were all there for the same purpose – to learn how to make the world a better place.

That spirit of cooperation continued as a group of more than eighty of us met to draft our section of the statement on world leadership. We looked past our races, religions, and selves as we affirmed the needs of the world. Students from the United States talked with students from Sierra Leone about poverty and malnutrition. Christians talked with Muslims and atheists about the need for education based on a fundamental system of morality. We all agreed on the need for an end to terrorism. For a person raised in the racially polarized atmosphere of the Deep South, it was an incredible sight. Still, it did nothing to prepare me for what came later. Midway through the week, all the students met together to watch presentations made by the international students about their home countries. During the question-and-answer session that followed, a student asked Firas, the ambassador from Lebanon, about his country's long-standing animosity toward Israel. Firas did not answer the question. Instead he stood up, walked over to Rami, the ambassador from Israel, and shook his hand. They embraced, and held up their hands in the sign for victory. The applause was deafening. In that auditorium full of high school students, bigotry, hatred, and fear had been defeated.

The sense of wonder stayed with us for the remainder of the week. We all knew that once we left the Congress, unity would not come so easily. On the final day, this knowledge had visibly affected everyone. We needed something to keep hope in our hearts and remind us that

faith in humanity is always justified. That night we gathered in the grass of an unlit park, each of us holding a candle. As we formed a great circle, the directors lit two or three candles, and we passed the flames around to each ambassador to remind ourselves to spread always the fire of leadership. Someone started to hum "Lean on Me," and soon the entire circle erupted in song. Blowing out our candles, we all joined hands and sang. I knew that moment that my life changed forever. I knew that we were sisters and brothers.