

## The Road to Change

Elijah Malik Russell was born with dual citizenship and lived the majority of his life in the U.S., yet some still don't consider him an American citizen. 17-year-old Elijah is no stranger to the issues of discrimination and lack of diversity in American society. Sometimes a regular day at school can quickly develop into an event that affects not just Elijah's life, but many of those in the community around him.

Born in Hamburg, Germany, Elijah had a very unusual childhood. Both his parents were professional musicians, which quickly ruled out the possibility of a settled life. Elijah's mom was born in Michigan and moved to Germany, where she met his dad, a native German. Elijah's father, Samy Sorge, better known by his stage name, Samy Deluxe, is one of the top rappers in Germany. Elijah's family was well-known, and his parents and occasionally even he would get recognized when they would go out. When Elijah was eight, his parents divorced. His dad stayed in Germany to continue his career in music, while Elijah and his mom moved to the U.S. to live with his grandma in Oregon.

As Elijah adjusted to life in the U.S., he started to understand the problems with discrimination and diversity. Growing up in Germany he didn't know many people of color, and that continued when he moved to Oregon. "I think 2% of Sunset [High School] is black," he said.

While Elijah has observed and even directly experienced discrimination throughout his life, there was one specific experience that would go on to influence him to make a change in the community. One day he was in his choir class when a random student, who he did not know, turned around and said to Elijah; "It's okay to kill you because you're black."

This had an effect on Elijah. He quickly went to the vice-principal of the school and the school board, to report the incident. Unfortunately, to his dismay there was little to no real action taken against the student. "Essentially all that they said was it's gonna be a learning experience," Elijah says. Elijah's family was not very happy with how the administration handled the situation. He quickly realized that there was no real system in place to deal with the types of discrimination he faced.

He told some of his close friends about what happened, but felt that very few of them could truly understand what he was going through. "Not everybody can understand what it's like to be targeted racially especially if they are not black or not ethnic," he explained. After this, Elijah decided he wanted to make a difference in his school. To do this, he created the Kids of Color club at Sunset. "Kids of Color was a club that I started because I wanted to have a place where people could share their experiences and make a tighter community because of it," Elijah says. Using the club systems that the school had set in place, he created a place where he could get together with others and share personal experiences about facing discrimination. The club is expanding, and through the club, Elijah has successfully set up a way for the minority to get together, and find others with similar experiences.

Elijah has such a unique set of experiences that he has taken and channeled back into society to help solve problems that he faces every day. Both in school and in the general community. He hopes that he can eventually create positive change in the community. Through hard work and perseverance, he has made a change in his community that will continue to have a positive effect, even after he is no longer directly working with the group.

He has decided that he wants to attend a historically black college so that he can experience more diversity. "I want to experience what it's like to be surrounded by more people that can maybe relate to similar experiences," Elijah says.