

## English assignment turns student into published poet

**By: Allison Mazur**

A high school English assignment turned into an experience of a lifetime for 15-year-old A.N. Myer student, Hardi Patel. After reading the novel *Dear Martin*, Patel penned a poem as a way to process what she'd learned about microaggressions and their impact on people's identity and treatment within society. Patel's poem, titled *Justyce's Poem*, was so moving that her English teacher encouraged her to attempt to get the poem into the hands of *Dear Martin* author, Nic Stone—a move which gave Patel's poem a global audience.

Within two days of sending her poem to Stone's office, Patel received a praise-filled response from Stone herself, calling her work incredible.

“Her response was so sweet. Her kind words inspired me to keep going and continue to take chances. I learned that if you just take the time to do just a little more than what's required, you can end up accomplishing amazing things.”

The Niagara Falls teen's poem is written from the perspective of Justyce McAllister, the main character in *Dear Martin*, who is a victim of racial profiling. *Dear Martin* is a story about Justyce McAllister, a Black seventeen-year-old who tries to make sense of his reality by writing letters to the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.

Patel's poem highlights Justyce's fight for racial equality, as well as his determination to improve the society he lives in. Her poem is written in the format of an 'I Am From' poem, a genre of poetry created by authors Julie Landsman and George Ella Lyon that works to combat discrimination and xenophobia. In addition to receiving kudos for her poem from author Nic Stone, the teen also received an invitation from Landsman to publish her poem in the *African American Registry*, since her poem fit its theme of democracy so well.

"I was excited and eager to take the opportunity because racism is a real issue, even for people my age, and I wanted to do what I could to raise awareness about it."

Patel was introduced to this form of writing by her ninth grade English teacher, Tina Chivers, who wanted her students to celebrate their cultural differences. Before writing *Justyce's Poem*, Patel wrote her own 'I Am From' poem which describes meaningful parts of her Indian heritage as well as life experiences that shaped her.

"I chose to write *Justyce's Poem* using this genre because I believe it is important to celebrate our individuality and to acknowledge that we all come from different places and have different experiences," said Patel.

Patel was greatly impacted by Stone's novel, *Dear Martin*, and encouraged many friends and family members to read the novel because of how impactful it was.

“Reading about racism from the perspective of a teenager close to my own age is more effective than reading about it from a textbook” stated Patel. “It helped me visualize how someone my own age could go through so much, and it made me feel grateful to live in such a safe, accepting, and diverse community as Niagara Falls.”

When asked about the inspiration behind her poem, Patel stated, “I wanted to give voice to a Black teenager’s opinion, and make sure Justyce’s words got out there, because when people hear stories about racism, they don’t always hear it from the perspectives of Black people; it’s usually written in a way that victimizes them and undermines their fight for freedom and equality.”

This is not the first time an author has praised Patel for her writing. “In grade seven I did a project about Robert Munsch, and decided to email him about it. He responded,” she said when asked about why she shared her poem with Stone. “I thought, ‘since he responded, why not email Nic Stone too?’”

Patel hopes that *Justyce’s Poem* will not only impact others, but that it will encourage them to share their own work with the world.

“You never know what can happen unless you try. The world is full of opportunities and I think it’s important that people take advantage of them,” said Patel.

Patel's poem is currently available to read on the "I Am From" website, and in the Fall issue of the 2022 edition of the African American Registry.

[https://aaregistry.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/9\\_2022-Registry\\_rev.pdf](https://aaregistry.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/9_2022-Registry_rev.pdf)

<https://iamfromproject.com/>.