

The Sentinel

St. Luke's School ⚡ New Canaan, CT

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What SDLC Taught Me

(And why it's time to rename America)

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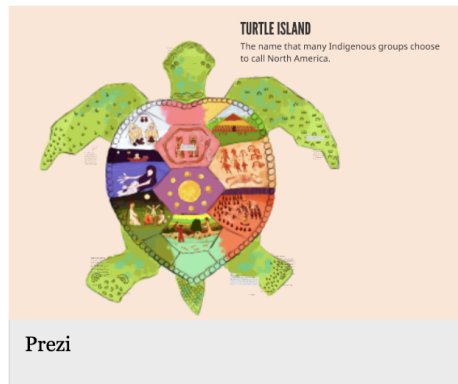
As a new member of this year's Diversity and Leadership Council, I had the honor of attending the four day national conference (SDLC) starting on December 1st. Because of the pandemic, this year's conference was held via Zoom, but the topics, from the cycle of oppression to gender identity, were just as thought-provoking as ever. Together, we worked to bridge cultural differences and discuss the shared challenges that students within our independent schools face.

A record number of participants — 2400, to be exact — logged onto Zoom on Monday night, excited, anxious, and curious for what the upcoming days would look like.

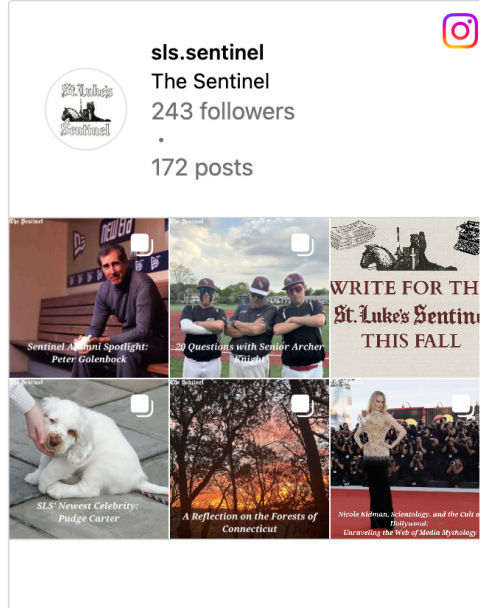
Sitting in my sweatpants at my desk chair, it was certainly a different presentation than anyone could have anticipated. I wondered if a virtual experience could provide the meaningful, ambitious discussions we sought.

When the green light on my camera flashed on, my computer screen was ambushed. Hundreds of boxes flooded before me. I spent the next 10 minutes clicking my cursor and flipping through 50 pages worth of Zoom icons. I couldn't believe how many people I was seeing. When I closed my computer, my ears were ringing; I was exhausted, and the whole situation felt overwhelming. I went to bed skeptical of what the next four days had in store.

The next morning, I joined my "family group" of 30 people, which was my home base for the rest of the week. Chai and Sydnie were the facilitators that led this enthusiastic bunch. Their intelligence, compassion, and down to earth communication made them phenomenal facilitators. They opened the floor for questions, telling us we could ask them whatever our hearts desired. They made it clear that they weren't our teachers or parents, and they wanted to be forthcoming



SLS on Instagram



and vulnerable with us. Having adults who are transparent and who aren't afraid to reveal less glamorous accounts of their high school lives was an enlightening experience.

On Wednesday we discussed the Black@Instagram pages that students across the country created last spring and summer. As I learned, some schools didn't have a diversity and leadership council, and others didn't even have an approachable headmaster. Multiple students in my group spoke about their experience being racially profiled and stereotyped in school. But no matter how different our schools and lives were, we found unity in our shared desire to make our schools home to a more diverse student body, even in the places where that meant ruffling some feathers. Chai repeated John Lewis' mantra so much that it became our guiding principle: "Make good trouble."

A group of 500 of us participated in an experience similar to the fishbowl, where you turned on your camera when you could speak from the "I" perspective of any of the identifiers called. These identifiers included race, gender identity, sexual orientation, household income, family structure and age. This was a nerve-racking experience. I generally don't identify myself through my religion or sexual orientation, and I was anxious about doing it in such a public way. Even more uncomfortable was the instruction to reveal my household income. As a person of privilege, I'm aware that I am in an income bracket that few Americans are. I suddenly had a disturbing vision of my face being the only one on the screen. I heaved a sigh of relief when the screen was filled with diverse faces, which only served as a mirror for me of my own misconception and revealed I need to have a broader view of what wealth looks like.

In addition to meeting passionate kids my age, I had the honor of listening to Lyla June, an indigenous activist, share the story of indigenous nations. Lyla called us her family and explained that in her culture, everyone is treated like family. She began by reading an original poem. She told us, "Words speak to the mind, poems speak to the heart." She clarified the misconceptions we're taught: Indigenous peoples were not "savages" or "uncivilized" as modern TV and literature depict. Indigenous civilization was thriving, far-reaching, and highly developed. When Spanish colonizers set foot on their land with swords and armour, the indigenous tribes turned the weapons into ornate silver jewelry. Their resilience was demonstrated in their unique ability to see beauty and complexity where it seemed there was none. Unlike the Incan and Egyptian civilizations whose legacies live on in their pyramids and temples, indigenous peoples made no marks on the land; instead, they worked in harmony with it. America, on the other hand, was named after the Italian voyager, **Amerigo Vespucci**, commissioned to enslave people and find gold. He embodies the worst of colonization. Lyla probed, why would we name this sacred land after him? Indigenous people have their own name for America: Turtle Island. In North American indigenous origin stories, the turtle is said to support the world, and is an icon of life itself. Rooted in kindness, compassion, and humility, Turtle Island reminds us how to be humble and to honor the beauty and integrity of indigenous culture.

After the keynote speaker, I Zoomed into my White Affinity Accountability and Awareness group, where we discussed how best to advocate for our BIPOC friends and community. One of the leaders said, "The beauty of anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, even in yourself. You don't need to be free of racism to be an antiracist." What I gleaned from this experience is that privilege isn't only evident in the clothes you wear or the house you live in. It's that sense of belonging, and the feeling that you are meant to be in every room you enter. I have always had a seat at a table, and I've never felt as if I've had to earn that; my existence was enough. Hearing people my age echo my same sentiments and be forthcoming with their blind spots was affirming.

In addition to heavy concepts, the conference built in moments of levity: On Thursday, it was the talent show. One boy, with the help of LED lights, transformed his room into a dance floor. Wearing a wig, high heels and lip syncing to Nicki Minaj, he lit up the Zoom screen. When my family group did a “Just Dance” dance-off to “That’s what makes you beautiful” (you read that right), Jakub brought the house down, and the Zoom comments were roaring! Even on Zoom, people felt comfortable letting down their guard and were appreciated as their authentic selves; it felt like I was a part of something that went deeper than a computer screen.

Friday night was the final ceremony. I felt grateful to have been a part of this rare experience with kind, smart, and like-minded people. One by one, the montage of faces clicked off. I smiled at the screen, reassured and empowered, knowing that 2,400 students were logging off Zoom to bring meaningful change in their communities. Together, we’re one step closer to creating Turtle Island, where everyone feels like they belong.

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About the Contributor



Cessa Lewis '23, Guest Writer

Cessa is a current eleventh-grader and joined the Sentinel recently in the spring. She is thrilled that she’s able to be a part of this fantastic team...

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