A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

“Oh ... you live there?” It’s a question I’ve been asked on numerous occasions, each time carrying a judgmental and surprised tone. I mean, it couldn’t have been possible. I wasn’t a drug dealer. I was well mannered and respectful. I frequently found myself on the high honor roll list. So why did I live in those low-income, federally-funded apartments down the road?

The answer is simple: Who I am doesn’t revolve around where I come from, or the amount of money my family has. While it may not be racism that causes prejudice views toward me, I am forced to face similar issues that Bryan Stevenson is tasked with dealing with. Whether it be race, sexuality, cultural background, income, or whatever else may factor into society’s incorrect and unnecessary judgments, the issue doesn’t just stick to the courtroom, and is a serious problem across the globe.

While my housing situation threw me into a few uncomfortable situations, it was my place of employment last summer that really caused me to question society’s prejudice nature.

After spending the past few years as a lifeguard on minimum wage, I was able to snag a job with Nor-West Regional Services, a small company that creates programs designed to assist children and adults with special needs. I was hired to work in the “PREP” program, a summer camp designed to prepare teens with mental disabilities for the real world. To be entirely honest, I was beyond nervous. As horrifying and cruel as it may sound. I didn’t feel prepared to work with this population. However, mere moments into my very first day, I realized that these people were just like me.
They, too, enjoyed watching sports, or cooking, or reading a good book, or going to the beach. Talking to the teens wasn’t some dreadful job, but instead a realization that nobody should be judged too soon.

In “Just Mercy,” it was race that created a barrier in the world. African Americans were forced into a secluded section of society, far from the others. I was witnessing the same occurrence with the special needs population. When my camp group would make our daily trip to the local pool, the other swimmers would quickly clear out of the water to avoid any confrontation with the Nor-West campers. While an empty pool did make my job easier, it was disheartening that in a world so focused on advancement, the world was still intimidated by people with special needs.

Now, at age 18, it is hard for to make quite the impact that Stevenson was able to put forward. However, I began to do what I could to spread the word about the reality of the situation and make some change in, at the very least, a small portion of the world. I focused on sharing my findings with my friends and family. When I told my best friend, Ben, that I was working with kids who have special needs, his first question sprung out immediately. “Is it tough to work with those people.” I quickly shot down his remark, and explained that the population was no different from him — or me. I attempted to correct everybody who mistook the teens to be something other than real people. While my impact was far more minor that that of Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, it was nonetheless making a difference.

After finishing “Just Mercy,” I now see a future full of making a difference. While I don’t have much of an interest in a law practice, I do have an interest in preventing prejudice against people with special needs. With age, and some more financial stability, my impact will hopefully blossom into something serious. Hopefully, I, too, can find my own Walter McMillan, and save somebody from the harms of prejudice and discrimination. My work with Nor-West was able to bring my true ideals and aspirations into focus, much like the early experiences in law helped shape the future of Bryan Stevenson. A combination of my summer job and Stevenson’s “Just
Mercy” has motivated me to do more to prevent discrimination against the disadvantaged population. Only time will tell where I journey to in life, but this book has helped carve a path that I am most certainly interested in taking.