

Hi guys as you just heard I am Alex Connors, and I'd like to share some words with you today. So to start off, I don't know if you all still do SAT words in the seventh grade, but I remember doing them not too long ago in English class. We had all written down our ten words for the week and one of the words happened to be loquacious, and the basic definition is a talkative person. This word had stifled a few laughs, I mean it sounds a little weird. But one of my classmates chimed in with a joke, and the joke went: loquacious can play basketball but he doesn't know how to read. This got an overwhelming amount of laughter. I was positive my teacher hadn't heard, and I sat there at a loss for words for the entire class period, I mean I could barely focus. To me it is clear the joke is racially charged but I want to break it down because it's completely ok to not immediately understand that. To my classmate, loquacious sounded like a stereotypical black name, which are often used as comedic relief. He mixed this along with another black stereotype, which is black people are good at basketball. This stereotype doesn't sound harmful, but the context is usually alongside how smart black people are, and here he ended it with this boy not knowing how to read. Representing this idea that black people are good at sports, but it's unlikely they are good at math or science. But like I said it ate away at me all day,

Why did I freeze up? Why didn't I say something? Why didn't I tell anyone? I was only 13 then, now I am 17, and I have two questions. The first one is who taught this 13-year-old boy these ideas? And the second one is how come the immediate reaction of my other classmates was laughter? Back then I didn't even think about that, I barely even knew how to process it, but then again is the boy who said the joke not held accountable because he was only 13 too? And that brings me to this big theme of "words matter". I bet if I asked everyone from my seventh-grade section if they remember that specific moment, they would say no I don't remember. But I do. It has stuck with me all these years. When I heard those words I felt a pit in my stomach, and I am sad to say that is not the only time words made me feel that way. This specific instance and others like it, though few and far between, left me wondering; Is this what people think when they think of black people? Is this what my friend's parents talk about behind closed doors loud enough for their children to hear? And to put it simply... It hurts. It really does. And those questions are something I still think about today. During my high school career, I have been class president for three years, captain of my soccer team, seen as a leader by the adults in my life. I have earned these labels of importance, and I hoped that maybe they would distinguish me, but to tell

you the truth, they have made me more fearful at times. More afraid to speak my mind, say what I believe in, call out someone for something wrong because the people in my life see me a certain way. I walk this line and I fear if I step out of it people's entire perceptions will change of me, and I'll be seen as nothing more than the color of my skin. It's that small moment, those few words that have created a struggle within me. So, I came to you today and I have shared this snapshot, and some of you may have been expecting something extreme, but in reality, it's those moments that may seem insignificant to most that have caused me to question everything.

Imagine you are this huge puzzle, and one piece gets damaged, it affects the whole thing right? That one piece, that small moment when something was said, and the whole puzzle, which is you it physically changes or changed this intricate puzzle of who you are. I believe everyone in this room can relate to that, my example was race based but I urge you to not think along these lines of black and white. It's happened to all of us! That thing that makes us different or unique we questioned it because someone said or implied that it needed to be fixed. Who you are needs to be fixed, what you think should be fixed, what you love should be fixed, what you believe should be fixed, who you believe in should be fixed, what you look

like should be fixed, how you talk should be fixed, what you wear should be fixed! And those words maybe caused you to shove down or hide apart of yourself. Maybe out of shame, maybe out of fear like me. Those small words have big consequences intention or not. So, *this* is why words matter.

*Therefore*, we need to think about what we say, we even need to think about what we're *thinking*- and I know it sounds cliché but don't be a reason why a piece in someone's puzzle of life is damaged! While you build yours be a reason you helped someone's else's come together. Thank you.