1. How have your life experiences contributed to bringing about positive change for marginalized communities, such as people of African descent? What do you want your future impact to be? Please be specific about your personal participation and/or leadership.

As an openly transgender, Black, and secular Muslim individual, I personally believe that my unique life experiences have contributed positively to nearly every community I have been a part of. I was raised Muslim and outed to my religious community in East Orange at the age of sixteen; despite the immediate backlash and traumatic experience of being disowned, I did my best to educate family and friends. Though much of the population pretended nothing had changed, some of the adults who originally disapproved of my gender and sexuality—including my mother—educated themselves as a result and responded with tenuous support and understanding when several of my younger peers came out to the public years later. I have upheld myself to the highest of standards when it comes to genuine curiosity regarding the LGBT+ community, and I feel that this example was able to help many individuals in my hometown come to terms with their learned biases and hasty judgment. As a community leader, I founded Essex County College’s first Gay-Straight Alliance—a club which became the official LGBT+ organization for the campus following my graduation—and made a concerted effort to call attention to the daily struggles transgender students of color faced in class and across campus. In addition, I accompanied ECC’s entire humanities department to confront the College’s administration regarding sliced funding for English, literature, and the arts; though our activities were eventually restricted, the event itself left a lasting impact on the political and social climate of the College.

My unstoppable drive has not wavered since my graduation from Essex. I was accepted into Rutgers through the Honors Living-Learning Community and threw myself immediately into activism via the program’s heavy focus on leadership and forming collective bonds as a community. Shortly after my enrollment in HLLC, I was also accepted as a Price-Humanities Scholar; therefore, I will be traveling abroad upon the conclusion of this semester as both a part of the Study Abroad program and a representative of the Price-Humanities program itself. I have actively campaigned for my own rights as an individual and raised the concerns of other marginalized students in the community, establishing a tight social network and ensuring that my classmates and friends are heard in their concerns. I also intend to run for a student senator position during the next election period to better campaign for the needs of my compeers.

Though I label myself as an activist for the sake of convenience, I do not actively seek recognition or any sort of accolade. My greatest desire is merely to ensure the well-being of anyone who is being silenced because of racism, sexism or prejudice; if that requires an individual to play the role of the nail that sticks up, I refuse to be hammered down by those who endeavor to maintain the status quo.

1. Discuss your experience with marginalization, and how you overcame a significant obstacle(s) that you faced.

The most readily apparent struggle I have faced as an individual is that of being openly gay and transgender surrounded by a community that dedicated itself wholeheartedly to making me regret it. Casual homophobia surrounded me for years with a potence that had me questioning the validity of my existence at the tender age of ten years old. Paired with a blatant refusal to learn English—at least until I taught myself the entire language just to play the newest Pokemon game—and an autism diagnosis my mother has refused to acknowledge to this day, this was a sure-fire recipe for disaster. I have been disabled since the age of sixteen and out as transgender for just as long; after a suicide attempt on my eighteenth birthday, I silently added depression, PTSD, and anxiety to the list of things I would forever be stigmatized for.

Despite this dossier of depressing experiences, I believe the most significant obstacle of my life in terms of marginalization was the year I experienced homelessness after being disowned for being gay. I was attending college as a full-time student and working nearly forty hours a week simultaneously; though I was thankfully able to cover meals, I was in no way able to afford any sort of shelter on my own and spent my nights on other people’s couches if I was lucky or park benches near Newark Penn Station if I was not. I took showers at the gym and took even greater pains to ensure no one realized I had a permanent address, storing my meager belongings at a friend’s house; regardless, my secret eventually came out to my place of employment and entire social circle as I struggled to find a place to divert my mail. Though I was scorned by coworkers for not having a stable place to live—doubly so for being Black and homeless—more people than I expected offered me help and support, and I am convinced to this day that there is no way I would have survived without my friend offering me food and a space in their already crowded house. Homelessness is a problem that requires a community to prevent and repair; having personally experienced the impact of communal aid, I will forever be thankful to the people who assisted me despite being in situations nearly as frightening as mine.