

Remarks by Elisa Peebles '08

March 5, 2007

Good Morning. I know this speech is a little late because it's March 5, but I'd like to present SUMA's Black History Month presentation. The idea for this presentation occurred during the last days of summer. For some reason, I was thinking about the Black History Month presentation, and how I couldn't remember if SUMA presented one last year or not. I was trying to come up with a new topic we could discuss. One day, while listening to my iTunes, the idea came to me through a song: Strange Fruit. Strange Fruit actually began as a poem written by a Jewish teacher from the Bronx about lynching in the south, and was made famous by the great jazz singer Billy Holiday. Knowing what the song was about, I never listened to it because I didn't want to get creeped out, but by accident I downloaded Nina Simone's version, and before I knew it, I was getting goose bumps as I heard the moving lyrics. As the song played, I Google Imaged "strange fruit" and found images of lynching and lynch victims. I realized that is what I needed to talk about.

Lynching started to really appear by the end of the reconstruction period, who's main purpose (to make life for free African Americans better) failed. This was the beginning of Jim Crow, segregation, Black Codes, and open racial hatred as a new way for the White society of the south to survive. Supremacists sought to use fear as a way of keeping blacks in their low, quacksalver status in society. Many lynch victims were accused of a crime, ranging from damaging property to murder. In the south, rape or attempted rape of a white woman was the common excuse for the barbaric punishment. More often than not, lynch victims were innocent or never even charged of anything. Lynching occurred all over the country, not just in the south, and whites were lynched as well, although not as often. In 1892 69 whites were lynched, and 131 African Americans. The white Americans victims mostly included immigrants, like Italian or Southern Europeans.

Lynching is a good example of how fear sparks hatred. African Americans and immigrants were seen as economic threats. Not to mention that an entire race of people that had once been slaves, not even considered human, were now legalized, free, citizens, expecting civil rights and social equality. Feeling threatened, these very brutal and inhumane actions were used to maintain white domination. Lynching continued into the 50's and 60's, and what's even more interesting is that it was unique to the United States. I realized that this was an almost forgotten piece of American history, the skeleton in the closet for all Americans, Black and White alike, and yet it is an important aspect of our history. Every year for Black history month we hear of the Civil Right's Movement, Martin Luther King, and the achievements of great African American men and women who fought for equal rights, but rarely do we hear of why they fought. Seeing these pictures reminded me that there was more going on than just African Americans not being allowed to sit in the good section of the movie theatre or to attend school with white children. We were truly hated for the color of our skin. I hope to convey my feelings and realization to you the same way it was ignited in: through picture and song.

However I must warn you, the images you are about to see are very graphic and, for some, disturbing.

Someone asked me what I want people to take away from this presentation. There is indeed something more I want people to become conscious of than the just the suffering African Americans endured, hundreds of years after slavery. I hope that just as much as you noticed the lynch victims in the photos, you noticed the spectators. I hope you noticed the great numbers of them, their eagerness to witness the lynchings and to sometimes make it a family event, and even the smiles that appeared on a few faces. I want you to know that the majority of the pictures you saw in the slide-show were at one time used as postcards. These are the facts that hurt me the most and the idea that fear and misunderstanding could be the root of such a strong cruel hate. The mistakes of our history teach us how to better ourselves for the future and the present. I hope you think twice before you discriminate or think lowly of someone or a group of people different from yourself, based on stereotypes or biased opinions. I also hope you make the effort to learn about a custom or culture you know nothing about, before you make a judge meant. Perhaps if we all do this, we can stop acts such as lynching from ever occurring again. This, to me, proves that Black history is everyone's history. There are lessons in it that everyone can benefit from. Thank you.