With the recent verdict of the Trayvon Martin case in Florida, young men – particularly young men of African, Caribbean, and Middle Eastern descent who live in the United States – have found themselves at the center of a national topic for debate. The historical and racial stereotypes of urban youth as ignorant, reckless, gang-oriented, drug-addicted, and crime-prone surrounds young men who grow up in urban environments like Bridgeport. The music industry, nightly news, and even rap lyrics depict individuals who look like us as hard core, tough-minded, anti-authority and criminal. This is why, perhaps, they Trayvon Martin / George Zimmerman event has taken on a life of its own. Since February 26th, 2012, we find ourselves on two sides of American history: one side we want to trust our court systems to make the right decisions and the other side we are skeptical and have little faith in the systemic oppression that occurs, and reoccurs, to keep youth like us, alienated and outside a society of trust, acceptance, and support.

We are African Americans, Pakistani, Jamaicans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, El Salvadorans, Mexicans, Colombians and Egyptians and this summer, we’ve attended classes with the aim to achieve academically and to attain more self-awareness through Upward Bound at Fairfield University. On campus, we met weekly to discuss the issues urban young men have and to question where we stand in a culture that does not expect us to achieve. Treyvon Martin, a kid who looked and dressed like several of us, lost his life too soon. Whether or not one judges his actions as innocent or guilty, we recognize that the verdict falls within 137 years of history since the Emancipation Proclamation. For these reasons, it has made us question who we are, who we want to be for others, and how we are viewed by those who don’t know us.

We, young men in Upward Bound, choose to transcend national statistics and live to counter how we are viewed by American society. Each of us will graduate high school and enter higher education, even when statistics report that over 48% of us will drop out. We will continue to read and discuss critical issues that matter to us, even though national examinations often report there are tremendous achievement gaps existing between us and other males our age who attend suburban, more affluent, school districts. We will continue to discuss what success looks like in the United States and to acknowledge the fact that there are more Black males who attend college than who are currently incarcerated in prison (although commonly reported the other way around). The negative reports about
urban youth are untruthful, judgmental, biased, and unjust. We find these stereotypes to be sad and disgusting. We write to oppose them.

As young men attending the Upward Bound program at Fairfield University we want to add our voices to current debates that surround Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. We have the right and the responsibility to be heard.

- We do not want to give others what they expect of us – the negative images they have are inaccurate,
- We see the case in Florida as another way for national press to portray us as thugs, delinquents, and criminals,
- We appreciate the structured experience and academic support offered by Upward Bound to support our achievement and to put us ahead.
- We want others to know that we do not take summers off like many of our peers in other schools. We work on our academic skills in the summer.
- We want the United States to continue to challenge its racist ways,
- We want teachers to offer more history in school, how it repeats itself, and what becomes of it when the history of ALL people is not promoted,
- We feel curriculum in school ignores who we are as learners – much of the curriculum is irrelevant to the skills we need. Instead of tests, we want to be taught.
- We feel the quality of a man is more than the color of his skin,
- We believe congregating together to discuss important issues is a step in the right direction for solving problems,
- We pledge to work against discrimination,
- We have respect for where we live, what we know, and how we’ve been raised,
- We know that it is impossible to know another’s story until you’ve walked in their shoes,
- We are much more than what the national and local statistics report, and
- We are working to change the narrative that is told about us.

We will make a difference. If we carried guns, stole cars, or were loitering streets, the press would be the first to report it. If someone was killed or harmed in a local neighborhood, we would be front-page news. Yet, when we get together to demonstrate that we are young men of integrity, we wonder where the cameras are and why there aren’t stories about us - young men who work hard and persevere despite obstacles that stand before us.

Bridgeport City Schools often receives negative press. This is a shame. Anyone who chooses to work with us during the summer or who take the time to get to know us throughout the school year will learn that we are more than the perceptions and labels placed on us by society. We are the young men of Upward Bound and we must achieve in the name of all those who have stood proudly before us and who have worked aggressively to counter the negativity often thrown our way. We stand proud. We are Bridgeport and are committed to writing a future for ourselves that transcends history.

Sincerely, Men of Integrity at Upward Bound,
Nathan Tulloch
DaVanty McTaVish
Oraene Morgan
Mubarak Sanni
Jonathan Crossman
Timothy Rose
Erik Marrero
Michardo Nevins
Rami Kharbouch
Almando Dixon
Malik Williams
Jaleel Khan
Zurah Rhodes
Kentish Carter
Andre Hackney
Tito Portillo
Kentish Carter
Andre Hackney
Tito Portillo