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It's easy to tell kids, "Work hard, and you can do anything you put your mind to." But for many kids, if you don't see it, why believe it?

Representation Matters

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Back in 2015 my mother and eight others were murdered in a racially motivated mass shooting at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina. That was a dark day. In just minutes, my best friend—my greatest support and inspiration—was gone. Mom was the one who believed in me, the one who taught me that I was "beautifully and wonderfully made" just the way I was. It was that love and belief that encouraged me to chase an impossible dream.

All my life, I told my mom that I wanted to play centerfield in the MLB one day. But most of the players on TV were white, and on the occasion I saw someone with a darker complexion, I was usually disheartened to learn they were from Cuba or the Dominican Republic. In this sea of teams and players, where was I? Was there a place for me?

Then I saw Andrew McCutchen.

He was running balls down in centerfield for the Pittsburgh Pirates. He looked like me. He came from humble beginnings like me. He even played the same position as me. My morale and dreams soared. For years I would call myself his biggest fan, and while I knew there were other players in the MLB that I could have followed like Bryce Harper or Mike Trout, there was something about the dark complexion, welcoming smile, and love of the game that drew me to Andrew—and let me dare to imagine *myself* on the field one day.

I played baseball in high school and college, which is where I was when Mom was killed. After some time playing minor league baseball, I was eventually drafted by the Chicago Cubs. I'd finally done what felt so impossible all those years earlier—and I knew I needed to give it all up.

Because after Mom's death, it became clear that baseball wasn't my calling.

Ending racism was.

So I found a voice. I became a speaker and an author. Over the last six years, I've criss-crossed the U.S. hundreds of times to share my family's story. I've spoken to teams, corporations, and more than 100,000 students. Every time, my message is the same: Love your neighbor.

While I'm on the road I often hear well-intentioned people say things like: "More Black kids should just do what you've done, Chris." Or "Why don't more people think like you?" At first, this would aggravate me. "They've got no idea what these kids are going through," I would immediately think. But the fact remained that for many Black kids, the obstacles in their lives simply felt insurmountable. The more I thought

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Just think what the pages of a book can show a child. There are picture books with kids of color engineering bridges, discovering lost species, exploring space, and running for president.

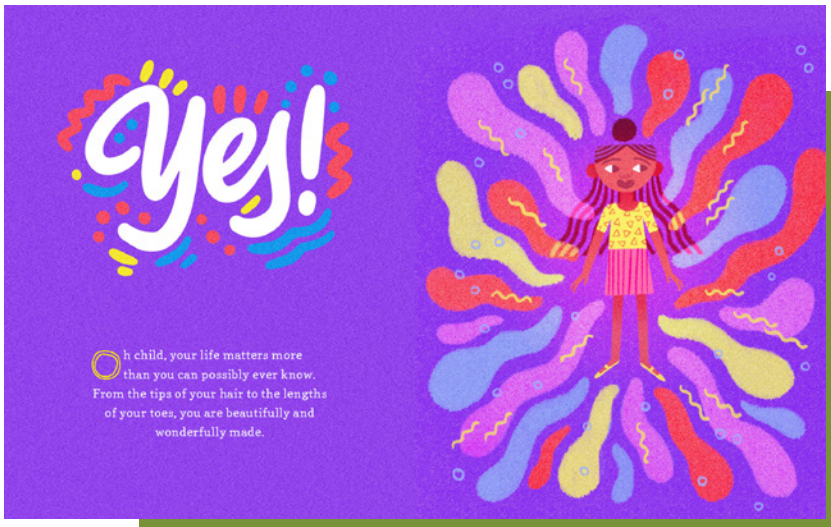
about it and the more I pondered my own life, the more I settled on an important truth: Black kids needed more Andrew McCutchens.

Which brings us to children's books.

There's so much power in *seeing* someone that looks like you who is doing something significant. After all, it's easy to tell kids, "Work hard, and you can do anything you put your mind to." That sounds nice, but for many kids, if you don't see it, why believe it?

It's for precisely this reason that children's literature can be one of our most powerful tools in encouraging the rising generation. Just think what the pages of a book can *show* a child. There are picture books with kids of color engineering bridges, discovering lost species, exploring space, and running for president. Board books teaching love, justice, and acceptance. Nonfiction titles exploring the shared history of a nation longing for healing. Biographies of real-life Andrew McCutchens of art, science, music, and more: real people who showed that impossible *can* be possible.

These and a growing number of tales readily accessible in libraries all over the nation are beginning to tell a story different from the one



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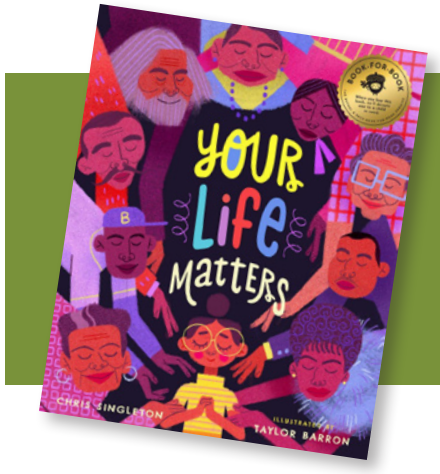
I grew up with. They are reminding kids of all colors that they matter! And they are celebrating the trails left behind by those who fought the fight to blaze them.

In my second children's book, *Your Life Matters,* those pioneering trailblazers are at the heart of the very story. As each page reminds children that their eyes, hands, minds, and hearts matter, the illustrations reveal heroes who can guide the way. And in my third book, *Baseball Around the World,* I use my love of baseball to show how people of all nations, cultures, and races have found common ground in a shared, beloved sport.

These books are just two new voices in what is building into a deafening chorus of affirmation and love for our most vulnerable kids. It is an awesome moment! But we can't let it die. To all teachers and librarians who are working to inspire and help, thank you for your efforts. May God bless you and the children you tirelessly work for. And to our nation's authors, illustrators, and publishers, may you never, ever underestimate the power of a child seeing him or herself in the pages of a book. What happens next depends on it.

These and a growing number of tales readily accessible in libraries all over the nation are beginning to tell a story different from the one I grew up with. They are reminding kids of all colors that they matter!

Chris Singleton *is an inspirational speaker and former professional baseball player who travels the country as a student achievement specialist. Chris has spoken to over thousands students and teachers across the nation and has helped thousands of students and teachers overcome hardships and excel in the classroom. Chris's speech on overcoming hate with love has been seen or shared millions of times and has gotten him featured on Lifetime, ESPN "E:60,"* USA Today, *CNN, and Fox News. Chris is a proud father of his son, CJ, and a proud husband to his high school sweetheart, Mariana.*



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