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In 1776 the greatest nation in the world declared itself free. There was, however, a catch. Not every American was truly free. It took 92 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed to get the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution ratified, and an additional 100 years after that for all United States citizens to truly and proudly say they had equal civil rights.

Section one of the Fourteenth Amendment states, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

As important as the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Amendments are to African-Americans, I believe the Fourteenth is the most substantial step our country has taken to ensure equal civil rights to all its citizens. This amendment ensured protection for African-Americans against the Supreme Court declaring the Civil Rights Act of 1866 as unconstitutional, and also came in response to the Dred Scott decision, which ruled that African-Americans were not and could not become citizens of the United States or enjoy any privileges or immunities of citizenship. Another action of racial injustice, the Black Codes, which were passed in the Southern states, attempted to return freed slaves back to some sort of slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment made these codes unlawful to enforce, leading to the improved lives of African-Americans, and the nation, as a whole.

If the Fourteenth Amendment had not been ratified the fight for civil rights 100 years later may not have happened. Where would this country be now if that crucial period of our history had not occurred? We could potentially still be riding segregated busses, making use of segregated public facilities, and earning our educations separately, with some likely curriculum differences between the white and black school systems. Most importantly, the hate would still remain. Today, white power organizations attempt to spread their hateful message across the country, with little response. If the civil rights movement of the 1960's had not happened, the underground network of white supremacists would not need to spread their message. It would be well spread among the masses of whites in America, just like it was for the better part of the twentieth century. Most of us have come to think of African-Americans as our equals. We eat in the same restaurants, have access to the same education, and work together in the job force. Our skin may have a different pigment, but we are all members of the human race.

Not a day passes in my life where I do not see some form of the Fourteenth Amendment in action. Gas stations, grocery stores, malls, and places of employment are all representations of how this amendment has affected the lives of United States citizens, black and white. If the Fourteenth Amendment had not been ratified there may still be forms of slavery in America. All of those representations of the Fourteenth Amendment I listed earlier would probably employ Caucasians with minimal labor jobs with reasonable wages while employing African-Americans with hard, manual labor jobs for little to no pay.

When I see an African-American, I see a person who possesses the same rights as I. We are both equally protected under the Constitution with our rights of life, liberty, and property. Neither of us can be denied equal protection of the laws under the Fourteenth Amendment. However our social and economic classes may differ, we are the same constitutionally. This is a

testament to the ardent and fervent believers that all men are created equal, no matter what their skin color, or creed may be. It is a testament that the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America is serving its purpose with diligence and conviction, under all circumstances, to all of America's citizens.