

A SOCIAL JUSTICE CLUB
INITIATIVE



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL USA

SEE ME FOR

YOURSELF

A COMPILATION OF STORIES OF JUSTICE
AND HUMAN RIGHTS FROM YOUTH AROUND
THE WORLD

PREFACE

In partnership with Amnesty International USA, the Social Justice Club Initiative organized this year-long project where we asked people of all ages from around the world to submit their stories of resilience, learning, and growth.

In the following pages, you will find personal stories shared from around the US, Brazil, Mexico, India, Uganda, and Syria. These are stories of justice, friendship, courage, patience, perseverance, kindness, forgiveness, humility, and sacrifice that encourage us to rethink diverse social stereotypes. They help us question the fairness of categorizing and discriminating against any social group or a person based on what we see in the media, social platforms, or what we uncritically assimilate through our daily conversations.

We are beyond grateful to our contributors who so bravely shared their powerful and moving stories with us.

Adib Rabbani

Project Coordinator

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Balaknama

by Shanno Khan, India



I live in Northeast Delhi, India. I was 10 when I used to work in the factory, making paint hooks during the night shift. Because my father was an alcoholic he was not with us and I had to work to help with the expenses of the house. However, I was very fond of studying from an early age and was able to attend school until grade 4. I missed middle school as I started working because my siblings, two brothers, and two sisters, were all younger than me.

On my way home from work, I used to stop by a cemetery where reading classes were being held for children by the Chetna NGO. Because the cemetery would not allow Muslims in, I had to hide the fact that I was from a Muslim family. As I attended this program, I was taken to a residential workshop by the Badhte Kadam Federation of Street and Working Children, where I learned about the qualities of leadership and, for the first time, about children's rights. There I also learned that I was not the only child going through so much difficulty and that there were many other children living in worse conditions than I did and all around India.

In my teenage years, I learned about the Balaknama newspaper, a unique newspaper for street and working kids. Because I was very fond of writing about children, I was made a reporter for Balaknama in 2007. After I started writing, I got admitted to 8th grade by Chetna NGO. When I finished 8th grade, I became the editor for the Balaknama. After I passed 12th grade, I went on to get my Bachelor's degree and I am currently pursuing my Master's degree.

Now as the Balaknama newspaper's advisor, I tell the reporters how to write the news, what should be covered, how to talk to the children, and which news should be published. In search of more news, from Delhi to Jhansi, I am leading a team of 16 reporters. Just as I got involved with the newspaper, my relatives got away from us. They wanted me to get married at the age of 15, but I had become so aware of children's rights that I opposed this and did not get married. I faced all my relatives'

opposition without objection. Still, they were envious and did not appreciate me because I progressed in life.

Using the experience I gained while working on the newspaper advisory board, I reached out to the people in the community to get their support for the surviving children and their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. We delivered dry meal kits to over 5,000 children and their families. During this experience, I saw that the condition of poor people in our society was getting worse regarding lack of food, clothing, and access to health. I, therefore, formed an organization that I registered as The Beginning of Slum Kids. We have a Facebook page, Twitter account, Instagram, and YouTube channel and I am handling all the social platforms for my organization. Please visit us, if you are interested in helping.



Sunshine in Dona Menina: Essay on Transcendent Friendship

by Bárbara Tomiatti Giancola, Brazil

That day, a sun of freedom was hovering, in bright and warm rays. Typical tropical climate in the middle of summer in the southern hemisphere. It was December and we were organizing one of the biggest initiatives of the third sector aimed at rescuing and including homeless people. The objective was to hold a supper for around two hundred people who lived in a Welcome Center for homeless people in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

I became a volunteer with ARCAH (Citizenship Rescue Association for the Love of Humanity), a third-sector organization that promotes the development of systems to assist people in vulnerable situations, as soon as I learned about its work in the digital environment and later at a sustainable fair. One of the programs carried out by the organization is to maintain an urban social garden (Horta) where people living in reception centers can have the opportunity to receive training as farmers. I remember that one of my first roles was to help organize Horta's graduation ceremony. On that occasion, the trainees had the opportunity to give their powerful and deeply moving testimonies. I could see the importance of human beings being treated as people. I saw people of all ages cry with joy for being there, when everything seemed hopeless and death, at some point, seemed the only solution. I saw smiles, hugs, feelings of gratitude, and bonds of genuine friendship being built. It was on that occasion that I started a relationship with a woman who reflected the sunlight when she smiled.

Dona Menina is known for her contagious and unmistakable laughter. Dona Menina (Lady Girl) is called this way due to her innocence and girlish sweetness. When I met her at her graduation, I saw her beaming, completely at ease in that welcoming environment. After the ceremony, we went to the vegetable garden and had a delicious lunch with the vegetables that were harvested. Soon afterward, we had a meeting to discuss the situation of homeless women. I organized an empathetic listening circle so that we all had the chance to share whatever we would like to say, but didn't have the opportunity to in everyday life. Dona Menina didn't want to share, just offered her attentive and empathetic listening to her colleagues who shared very difficult situations and went through an existence dictated by the cruelest forces.

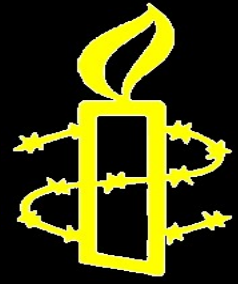
Dona Menina is part of this clan of women. In our third meeting, the friendship came to fruition in a transcendent way. We were at a Christmas dinner in an atmosphere of party and celebration. One of the activities was a scavenger hunt with the traditional

sack race. We had to pair up to share the same bag. When choosing pairs, luckily my gaze met hers. And we made quite a team! The strategy came from her: when the race starts, we're going to do high jumps and we're going to do it in sync, our jumps need to be together. When I say "go" you jump and don't stop until the final line! I followed her lead and they more than worked! Little by little, Dona Menina and I eliminated every other team. Even people taller and with longer legs were left behind in our synchronicity and synchronization of jumps. Led by Dona Menina, I saw us win with ease and joy. Little by little, our competitors tried to carry out the same strategy, only by this time we were already completely on the same page, and after lots of laughter, hugs, and celebrations we reached the final line! When crossing the finish line, I received one of the warmest hugs of my entire life. In the sack race, Dona Menina and I were one body mass that cooperated to take firm steps and leaps toward our destination. What looked like a purposeless scavenger hunt, became an unforgettable moment filled with meanings that transcend matter and can only be understood at the level of our souls.



A Survival's Story

Anonymous, Syria



- How was your life before ISIS?

Before ISIS, my life was so beautiful. I lived with my family, including my father, brother, and sister. I went to school, and we lived in Domiz, which is close to Sinjar City. Our economic situation was good, and we were happy. We were living a simple and peaceful life.

- When and where were you captured?

I was captured on the 3rd of August 2014. My family and I were on Mount Sinjar. I spent 3 years in captivity and ran away in 2017.

- Can you talk a little bit about your life in captivity? Only what you are comfortable with.

ISIS captured us while we were trying to reach Sinjar Mountain. I was allowed to stay with my mother because I was only 14 years old at the time. Then they took us from Sinjar to Tel-Afar. My family and I spent 8 months in Tel-Afar. Life was really bad there. We didn't have enough food or a good shelter. After 8 months, they separated us. They took my father and oldest brother. Then, they took me and my sister. My five other brothers were left with my mother. They sold me more than 10 times to different people. Each time was a story itself. I tried to escape more than once, but I failed. ISIS fighters kept telling me that if I went back to my family, they would kill me because I became Muslim. Sometimes I believed what they said, but I knew it wasn't true and that ISIS was lying. They wanted to terrify us. At some point while in captivity, I was able to contact my uncle. I told him that I would try to run away, and he was so happy.

- How do you spend your life after you have survived?

Since I escaped, I have been working to help support my 5 brothers and my mother who also survived. I work and support them, so that they can finish their studies because they are all younger than me. Before opening my bakery, I worked as a translator. Now, I prepare birthday cakes and other sweets. My work has helped me recover and mentally heal.

- What is your message to the international community?

My message to the world is that I want them to wake up and start helping us, but my message is mostly to our government. Our government needs to establish a team to help us find our missing people, especially from Al Hol Camp. My father, brother, and sister are still missing.

- Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Survivors should never feel inferior to anyone. I also think that if the world helps us, we will recover faster and will be motivated and encouraged to work and continue our lives. When I see countries mentioning our names and willing to help us, I get happy and proud. I want this to be continued in every country in the world.



The Freedom to Be Different

by Emilia Mireles Moreno, Mexico

Talking about freedom means dealing with such an important topic, whose only problem is having few words for so many feelings. I know that many people think that today's freedom is at its maximum splendor, but is it true? I think not, because we do not have the freedom we dreamed of yet.

Now, what is freedom? The word "freedom" has a different meaning for each person. For example, Aristotle said "he who has overcome his fears will be truly free", an idea that can be complemented by the words of Jim Morrison "The most important type of freedom is to be what you really are," that is, we are free when we show our essence.

Every day around us, however, we come across many stereotypes: social, cultural, political, racial, sexual, and above all beauty. Appearance is always linked to the value that should be given to each person. It seems that we do not care about the interior of each individual, but what it reflects. At the same time, a pattern of behavior, encouraged by the media, advertising, and especially social networks has been imposed on us.

As teenagers one of our biggest concerns is fitting in. We want to belong to a group, and feel accepted. Being at a stage of changes and insecurities we end up falling into the obsession of complying with any form of stereotypes. Without realizing we develop eating disorders and mental problems, that is, in search of supposed happiness, we build hell. But why do we harm ourselves?

It is time for us to become aware of our lives, of our identity, about who we are. Each one of us is different and that's okay. Before accepting that being different is okay, we must begin by believing that we are valuable people, human beings who are wrong, and who are perfect while being imperfect. The term "different" has a close connection with diversity. Let's think of examples that lead us to think big, like working in a company: if every personnel within a company had the same capabilities, skills, and ideas, probably the profits that are sought to be obtained would not be attained because to achieve something of that magnitude it is always necessary to resort to collaborative work, where each person contributes their opinion and their work according to its potential and above all its essence.

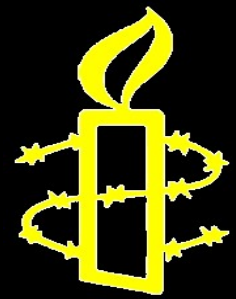
Having freedom over ourselves means having knowledge about our potential and knowing what to do with that freedom. While it is true that there are rules, there is also independence. Being able to know and accept ourselves implies dedication and time. To achieve this let's start with highlighting the best in us and work on what we are weak in. At the same time, I think there is nothing wrong with taking care of our body and our mental health, that is, it is valid to improve who we are, either with the implementation of routines for skin care, periods of exercise, reading or study habits, diets, and organization, as long we do not do it just for fashion, but to get closer to the version we want to be.

It is time to take the reins of our lives, to explore the real world, away from the screen, social networks, and the negative things the media transmits to us. Let's not be afraid to dress, act, love, or think differently. Let us not retain what we are for fear of rejection because, at the end of the day, there will always be a safe place for us in a world where we can be perfect by being unique.



Dyslexia

by Siena Chai, USA



In sixth grade, my mother told me she thought I might have dyslexia. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. Sure I would never do well on standardized tests, but dyslexia was never in the picture. She then proceeded to tell me that I would have to start attending test sessions.

I remember the first time I got tested I was so nervous. The lady that tested me had blonde hair and a smile that was not as sincere as she wanted it to be. During the session, she would show me a series of pictures in order and then tell me to recite the order again after five minutes. I could not remember anything, and because of that, I felt stupid. This feeling is one of the worst feelings someone can experience. You feel so helpless like you are truly drowning in your own guilt and dissatisfaction.

At the time, I went to a Mandarin immersion school, so most of the kids were Asian. These kids were the products of “tiger moms” and upheld the studious stereotype formulated by society. So, telling people that I was getting tested for dyslexia was not an option. When my classmates would ask where I was going because I often had to leave school early, I would say “Just physical therapy”. The shadow of disappointment from my peers covered the light of my truth.

One day, my teacher called on me to read a passage out loud. Now this seems really dramatic, but I was never called on before. I would always make an effort to hide under a blanket of invisibility, which worked up until now. She pointed to the text on the whiteboard, and I glanced at the black letters that looked like a bunch of meaningless dots. I froze. The fear of messing up the words blocked my voice from making any real sound. She could tell I was nervous. I thought back to a conversation I had with my mom, describing how having dyslexia has made her realize she had to work ten times harder than her peers. Breathing in, I knew that I had her strength backing me up, pushing me to seek clarity in the most confusing times. So, throwing all

my fears to the side, I focused my vision back on the whiteboard and started to read. Messing up occasionally, but I still read.

My story with dyslexia is personal to me as a human. Not because I am Asian. The model minority myth is not talked about because people don't think that it negatively affects the Asian community, but they are wrong. I realize that those comments are upheld because of the model minority myth and stereotypes about Asian people that are just not true. We should not be expected to succeed because of our race but should not be undermined when we do. What I learned from myself is such: you can not limit yourself out of fear. Fear of being an "other". Fear of not upholding a stereotype. Or even fear of yourself. I am a clear example of not fitting the stereotype, but that has not stopped me from accomplishing my goals. I started to volunteer to read passages at my church. In general, I have fallen in love with reading, enjoying books like *Beloved*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Evicted*. So, now it is your turn to face your fears.



The Christian Stereotype

by Anastasia Malagon, USA

I grew up in a Christian household, but I didn't know what being a Christian was. "Judgemental hypocrites, perfect know-it-alls," these words have become all too familiar. In third grade, I was shy and kept to myself because I didn't want to talk to anyone. I would observe all the kids to see who I could get along with. The popular kids seemed to get all the attention. I would admire them and how much the other students liked them. I felt myself wanting to become like them, so I began to try to fit in. Rebelling against my parents, talking bad about others, and agreeing to what I probably shouldn't have become my new norm. This had never caught my attention prior, but I did it for popularity. I couldn't even succeed at it though. When pressured, I would back out at the last second; being called a baby or a wimp for not wanting to act like them. I found myself thinking, "This is not cool." No matter how hard I tried, I could never fit in. That's when my life took a toll.

It wasn't until my parents started fighting that I was put in a position to become a caretaker for my siblings. I made sure they ate, had their clothes ready for the following day, made sure they did their homework and got them to bed at a reasonable time. This became my new routine. It was hard going home every day to hear my parents fight, not understanding why or how to stop it. I thought school would be an outlet for me to escape the fighting and the responsibilities. I was wrong. Instead, I would get made fun of for the clothes I wore, the way I spoke, and the way I looked. I kept it a secret from my family, thinking "I can't put any more stress on them." I managed to stay quiet but the bullying started to get to me. I began to not eat and stayed in my room all day crying. "God, what is so wrong with me? Why can't I fit in no matter how hard I try? Why am I going through this? Why me?" I never got a response, which made me start to doubt God.

The bullying stopped after my sister found a note a kid wrote to me saying awful things. The kid got in trouble. My parents got divorced making them go on with their separate lives; my mom went on to buy a house of her own. She left, and my dad turned into my worst nightmare. My dad would make me question if God could ever love me, and would make me feel as if I was invisible, worthless, unloved, stupid, and a mistake. I would yell at God for not helping me, but I never once gave God the time to help me. As people, we tend to want the answer right away.

God's timing is perfect though. Once we start to doubt Him, He will provide for us even in our doubt. I wanted a happy all-American family, not a "broken family". I soon realized this "broken family" was what needed to happen to get me to where I am today. I struggle with forgiving myself and past mistakes I made. Despite my struggle, God still loves me. He is still there and is proud to call me His. What makes you believe He won't listen to you? Is it because you've prayed before and He hasn't answered, or because God has never done anything for you?

If you have felt that way, I have felt the same way and I understand. I remember the day God answered my prayers like it was yesterday. I was fifteen years old and went to a church called "Apostolic Jesus Name Church." Our youth group decided to go to North Carolina for an event. It was the last night and I'll never forget what Pastor Chavis screamed into the mic "If you think God can't hear, I am here to tell you that's a lie!" The message began to hit me in the face like cold water, sentence after sentence. At the end of the service, they did an altar call, which is where you go up and everyone else will pray with you to ask God to help you. I remember once I got to the altar, the tears began to flow, and I fell to my knees sobbing from how much pain I was holding onto, and my childhood best friend held me as I cried. After I was done, I felt the weight lifted off my shoulders.

I felt sad for leaving these amazing God-loving people but like the saying goes "good things must come to an end." As we were leaving to go back home, my best friend stopped me. She said "God wanted me to tell you something." I was immediately curious, considering the entire time I was there I was praying for God to talk to me, whether it was through the pastor, my friends, or the songs. "What is it?" I asked. "God wanted me to tell you that your parent's divorce was not your fault." As soon as she said my parents' divorce wasn't my fault, I began to sob. I thought it was my fault, as I was sobbing, and she continued to say, "He loves you, Anna. You are still His daughter, and He hears your cries."

From that moment, I made a silent vow to live my life for God. I changed the way I acted, the way I thought, and the way I perceived others. As the years went by, I kept hearing people say, "Christians are so perfect. They choose to believe in a God who doesn't even love them. I bet you being a Christian is so easy. Their God isn't even real." I've seen too much in my own life and the lives of others to not believe. There are too many references to the Bible and God; some of which Hollywood can't help but put into their movies. If my God isn't real, then why do people always bring Him up? Why do people make fun of something that "doesn't exist" if my God isn't real? The answer would be that they knew of His existence but chose to ignore Him. Christians aren't perfect and I'm not perfect either; we're humans and we're going to make mistakes because we have feelings and aren't robots. The difference is that we

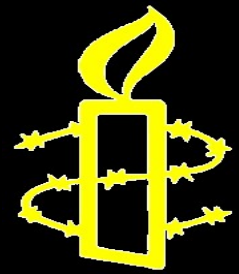
don't have to feel afraid to talk about our struggles or emotions. We have a God we can trust in who is willing to listen and knows our struggles. He is willing to love us time and time again and will always have His arms wide open for us. Most Christians go through tribulations that lead us to God. But even then, we still don't go to Him as a first option or want to know Him right away. We are human. Sometimes it takes real life for people to believe. Some of us have had church trauma to the point where we don't want to know who God is. Our God is so merciful and loving and that's the thing: people misrepresent God as who He isn't. Our God is real and though we may not be able to see Him, we can feel Him and see Him through the work He does. Take the air, for example. You can't see the air, but you know that it's there to help you breathe.

Without God, I wouldn't be here because I would've given up a long time ago. Being a Christian is not easy. There is a lot you "lose" because of Who and what you believe in. You may lose friends, get made fun of, or get labeled a "Jesus freak" (which isn't a bad thing). After all, John 15:18 states "if the world hates you, remember that it hated me first." What this verse is saying is that if you choose to follow God, then the world is going to hate you. You won't be popular and you may only have a few friends, but that's okay. The world hated God so much that we crucified Him. See, Christians still feel sadness, anger, happiness, confusion, and conflict. I understand that life is a learning lesson and I have to lean on God. I've heard so many times that I should be happy to wake up the next day because it isn't promised. If I'm being honest, I have dreaded waking up because I have to go to school where my faith is tested every day and where God is misrepresented. I struggle with reading my Bible, praying, and sometimes I even struggle with comparison. I compare myself to other girls and the way they look, the way their clothes fit them perfectly, and the way they are naturally pretty. I find myself looking at other Christians and wishing I was like them. Life as a Christian isn't perfect. My struggle as one is real. We are normal people who go through life just like everyone else. We get frustrated, we get upset. If more people took the time to understand people who are different than them, then the world would be a better place.



Surviving as an Orphan

by Charles Kamywa, Uganda



At the early age of two in 1995, I lost my father due to HIV/AIDS. I, literally, never experienced anything to do with a father's love. At that point, I didn't know that children belonged to two parents--until I got into kindergarten and friends mentioned their two parents. Later on, my mother told me about his sudden passing but I couldn't feel the pain until I started advancing in age and realizing what a big gap there was in my life without him. Struggling with our infected single mother Christine, my elderly sisters and brothers narrate that mostly due to the stress, trauma, and fear that she would die soon and leave us (eleven children) because of AIDS, life became more stressful and difficult in all aspects.

Mother died on Easter 2000. Life became more meaningless to us and this was a big shock in my life. At this point, none of my elder brothers or sisters could afford to take care of us, the young last four born siblings. Our eldest brother Patrick who was by then in high school had no choice but to drop out of school and try the best he could to ensure our survival. The best he could do was to cultivate and provide us with food.

Being the last born among 11 siblings, I at some point faced rejection by some close relatives who thought I was also HIV positive, knowing I contracted it through contact with my mother during birth. This brought self-doubt in me because I was sure my mother delivered me on her way to the hospital and there was a high chance of blood contact (in the 90s and early 20s, there was a lot of discrimination against HIV patients amongst people due to ignorance). Thank God after many years of fearing taking a test to find out whether I was positive or not, I eventually took the test when I was 19 years old and tested negative. Surrounded by this kind of stigmatization and trauma, I forced myself to change environment and asked one of my elder brothers to please take me to our late mother's friend Margaret who lived in Bukaya. Luckily she accepted to take me in. She could only afford to feed me and provide shelter, and of course, give me love which restored a bit of hope and peace of mind. Being a single lady, she couldn't afford to take me to school or provide medication, and other basic needs.

Since I was very enthusiastic about studying and learning and always wanted to become someone who impacts the lives of others, I started knocking at people's doors asking whether they could offer me domestic work for payment such that I could pay for my school fees, scholastic materials and medication. Luckily, this happened and

many families could call me to wash their clothes, slash compounds, trim natural fences, help at construction sites as well as dig in gardens. I could sacrifice one term out of the three school terms to look for funds so that I could study the two remaining terms without any disturbance. I did this every year until I completed primary and part of my secondary level school.

When that was completed, I decided to join another nearby high school which was quite more expensive than the one I previously attended but still, I was sure I had the capacity to meet the bills. The second week after joining, school leadership campaigns opened, and I knew very well there were posts that when students competed for and got elected to, they wouldn't have to pay school fees. So I decided to run as the president of the student body (Head Prefect) even though I was a newcomer and few students knew me. However, due to my academic background in the previous school, motivational speech, and manifesto on the day of the opening campaign, I scored 80% and became the new Head Prefect 2011 hence exempted from paying school fees until I completed high school.

After high school, I really had no hope of attending University since it was super expensive to afford. During my holiday from high school, I applied for a job as a waiter at a nearby restaurant where tourists often came to have their meals. While working there, a German gentleman called Reinhard who was advanced in age, close to 75 years old, came along to have his meals during the last three days of his stay in Uganda. We became friends after the second day that I served him and I told him about my life background and how much zeal I had for attending University. This was so touching to him that he offered to pay my university bills, including accommodation and upkeep. When he went back to Germany, we kept the communication flow via email and WhatsApp but after six months, the communication stopped. He wouldn't reply to my emails or write back on WhatsApp. This made me sad, confused, and emotional at the same time. I wished that at least he would have a glance at me wearing a graduation gown to see the result of his confidence in me. In 2019 I traveled to Germany twice on a sponsored internship and exchange program. Together with my German friends and their parents, we tried to look for him, published a letter in the newspapers, and looked at online phone books but still we couldn't find him. At this point, I am very grateful to God and applaud myself for being patient with myself and being my own parent to reflect, counsel, and advise myself, choosing not to become a useless boy, maybe stealing on the streets or addicted to drugs.

I am now a graduate with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration and a Certificate in Development Studies. I proudly founded with friends a charitable non-governmental organization called ReinhardFoundation (www.reinhard.ug) in memory of Mr. Reinhard. This came from a strong motivation to help my fellow

orphans who are nearly rejected, the girl child who is taken advantage of by our society and overlooked, needy youths, as well as the needy elderly who are abandoned mostly in villages with no hope, food, shelter, and medication. Little does our generation know we exist thanks to them and their past struggles. I am also a climate enthusiast and love to plant trees, sensitizing local people about the dangers of climate change and how we can restore it.

In conclusion, I want to thank this initiative for coming up with a writing project through which people from different parts of the world can express themselves and share stories that may restore hope while giving voice to stress and trauma. May the souls of my Parents (Kayima Patrick and Christine Amulade) rest in eternal Peace. In loving memory of my hero Reinhard who contributed so much to what I am today. Thank you!!!



My Uncle Milan

by David Orta, USA



Society says “black people” love collard greens, my Uncle Milan would not agree!
Society says “black people” have rhythm and can dance, when my Uncle Milan tries,
he rips his pants!.

Society says “black people” love rap and basketball, but my Uncle Milan can’t stand
either at all!

Society says “black people” are angry and mean, but my Uncle Milan is one of the
happiest people I’ve ever seen!

Society says “black people” steal and riot, but my Uncle Milan gives the shirt off his
back, all while smiling and quiet.

Society says social stereotypes exist for a reason, and yet my Uncle Milan defies almost
ALL of them, throughout every year and season!

Society says that social stereotypes are PROOF that groups of people have their
expected stereotypes because that’s just “what they do”, but my Uncle Milan is PROOF
that is just simply not true!

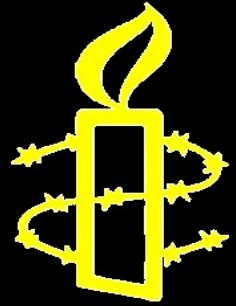
Society says that you can’t grow beyond your surroundings, but my Uncle Milan has
shown me that you can surpass yourself, and reach a goal surmounting!

Society says that “certain people” will only go “so far”, however, my Uncle Milan has
shown me that ANYONE can be a star!

Society says that being “rich” is only for the “wealthy” while my Uncle Milan says it’s
far more important to be mentally and emotionally healthy!

My Identity

by Gabriel Hasting, USA



Beneath the apex of the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial bridge, the winding, spindly fingers of ash trees strain and reach silently for the vibrant blue stratosphere; today it is freckled with weightless June clouds the color of eggshell. From my bench half a mile away, they seem so close to their inconceivable destination. Typically, I'd admire them a while longer. Today, however, the city has no shortage of color. Thousands of people commune downtown in celebration, spreading the month's ubiquitous rainbow. Today pride spills over the street, onto the sidewalk, and threatens to occupy every last empty corner like a powerful tide spreading its broad, elegant contour over a black asphalt beach.

The throng continues its polyrhythmic march down South Clinton Street, now a writhing, shifting landmass of every kind of person. The morning sun, now almost noon, casts my shadow in their direction; an image befitting of my sentiments regarding today. It looks so easy to just walk right on in, shed your individuality for a few hours, and become the experience. Yet another flake in the rolling summer snowball. Now the crowd is blurring with distance, the individual members implied rather than seen. The familiar twinge of remorse rises in my throat as my mind reminds me, no one would have stopped you. I know. I still cannot help but feel unwelcome.

I've known my orientation for many years. It came as naturally as anything else I'd discovered in adolescence, my affinity for both sexes. It wasn't until early teenhood that I decided to keep it to myself. I remember why, watching one of my classmates come out. He wasn't shamed, wasn't isolated, nothing like that; they treated the event with reverence and they celebrated him. That was what scared me. I felt that if I mentioned the topic I'd have all these questions to answer, everyone would want a 'story' or my 'journey'. I had nothing of the sort. I was just who I was. I thought it wouldn't be valid without some odyssey recounting how I came out bisexual, that they'd think I was saying it for attention. And now here I am, the celebration having turned the corner, and for yet another June I'm just some guy on a bench. There's no flag pinned to the wall in my room, I don't own any rainbow clothing, and I can't bring myself to join any celebration for fear that my utter lack of flamboyance will stick out, leaving me isolated just the same.

I'm not ashamed of my identity, I know I'm not inferior because of who I am, but pride is hard for me. I don't feel proud of who I'm attracted to just the same as I don't feel proud of having brown eyes or dark hair; yet watching the parade of people just like me who celebrate the traits we share completely overlook me makes me feel sad and alone. A hopeless bystander in a canoe with one oar, watching everyone else row off into the horizon while I wonder what makes me not worth celebrating.

Slowly strolling home, I try to make myself as absent as possible. I'm tired of thinking about what could've been. It always seems like the colorful flags waving from street lamps do so mockingly, to impress upon me what a good time I'd be having if I didn't overthink everything. Wrapped up in my self-fulfilling prophecy, I don't even notice the errant arm that pulls me into the march. Disoriented for a brief moment, the forward momentum of the crowd restores my balance and leaves me no choice but to keep going. Looking around awkwardly, I realize I've been shifted to the very nucleus of the march; hemmed in tightly by marchers wearing face paint and flags.

Panic wastes no time descending on me. I'm not supposed to be here, I don't share their feelings. I'm a monochrome blemish on this great variegated surge; a plain plastic bottle lodged in the Great Barrier Reef. I want to hide my face, but the mob gives me no such choice. Another hand gives me a strong pat on the shoulder blade, and I look around to see a bearded man smiling, offering some unintelligible words of praise and pointing at my shirt. His speech is enveloped by the din trailing our great march, but looking at my torso I understand completely. The rainbow chalk strewn about the streets as part of the festivities has left particolored streaks down my body, turning my ordinary plainclothes body into a mural commemorating the day. It is yet another in today's series of apt metaphors that convey my innermost feelings; ordinary clothes, typically unexceptional, those which mirror my inner traits, now blessed with a splash of pride. Looking at this man who simply assumes I had a creative idea to express myself, a smile cannot help but make two asymmetrical hemispheres of my face. The ordinary truth now dawns before my eyes at last, this is just my way of showing love for who I am.

Going about the day, however plain, I never leave my personality behind. The flag isn't in my room, it's in my head, where it cannot be disturbed. Without realizing I've straightened my back, the energy here compels me. My smile decides to stick around. No one denied me my place, no one asked me anything, not even if I wanted to join. They probably thought I was someone they knew, that they'd missed one of their friends along the route. No longer left to wonder about why I'm not proud, through some divine providence now I am pride itself.

In the dispersing crowd, I notice something. Once again, the group of people whose traits we share overlook me. They are searching for friends, relatives, familiar faces in

the now-dissolving multi-color menagerie. Again I am a stranger in this scene, and people weave around me with no thought of my presence. This time, however, I am happy. No one demands answers from me to questions I'd never been asked, there is no expectation of a struggle or any theatrics of which I am an unwilling star. I'm just another person out here showing my colors, in a unique way that is all my own. Walking home, my smile persists; my mind paints a similar portrait, now with one key change. Again a fleet of canoes, going elegantly into the warm summer sunset, but now I, too, am among them, sticking out but rowing just the same.



Now I Can Read the Fine Print (Mostly)

by Tina Li, USA

It's September 14, 2012. I remember this because my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Bushouse, is drilling it into us that we need to write our names and the date on all of our work. She says it's important for third grade. I think it's dumb because Max says his third-grade teacher is still parroting the same thing. What does that idiot know though. Still, I remember leaving my mom's minivan at the carpool line, humming "Gotta Feeling" by The Black Eyed Peas. Dad made pancakes and whipped cream for breakfast. It's a Friday, and that means the weekend starts the second school lets out. Most importantly, we'll have to take vision and hearing tests today, so math class will be shorter.

Skipping into Mrs. Bushouse's classroom, I hesitate at the door, inhaling pumpkin spice. It's so strong that my head begins pounding like it did when I sat next to the drummer at a Chinese New Year festival performance and then had my ears blasted off when he played for the dragon dances. Scanning the snoopy dog cartoons dancing across the walls, I notice what looks like a game of hangman on the new smartboard. "Do you know why we're playing hangman?" I ask my deskmate CJ. The pencil between his fingers twirls to a stop. He stares at me like I have cooties.

Then, Mrs. Bushouse goes "Red Robin" over the chatter, and we all echo "Yum."

The hangman on the board turns out not to be the game but a division math problem. As Mrs. Bushouse launches into a lengthy explanation on the property of zero or something, I'm squinting at the analog clock a few feet above her head. I hate analog clocks. I can't distinguish between the different lines, so the whole thing looks like Pac-Man mid-summersault. None of this matters because I have no idea when it's our turn to head to the gym for vision tests. I'm halfway through a math handout, and the intercom buzzes into the throbbing quiet. It's our turn for testing. Everyone clambers out of their chairs before the announcement finishes, but Mrs. Bushouse forces us to line up by the backpacks before marching us down to the gym.

By this point, I already have a feeling today is not going to be so great, dizzy from breathing in spice all morning and having just realized that the vision tests are cutting

into recess. This is confirmed before I see the gym doors, the line stretching as long as those in China's customs. Last summer vacation, my family flew back to visit my grandparents in China, where my relatives are little more than strangers to me. The day we left for the airport, my mom needed to remind gōnggong, her father, of my name when we said goodbye. That trip wasn't my first time back. Still, it was the first time I was old enough to understand the overwhelming sense of foreignness that spiked every time I tried holding a broken conversation or when other kids on the street pointed at my siblings and me. Even in China, my tanned skin brands me as different. I grew so tired of hearing how my skin was "tài hēile," too dark, I asked my dad what the big deal was. He just shrugged. Paleness is the beauty standard there, and only tourists and country bumkins are exceptions. I don't think he meant to imply I was a tourist too.

I wonder if my mom knew there'd be a tradeoff to having children in America. I wonder why it was worth them losing the pieces marking them Chinese.

Step by step. I reach the gym door. The line curves into a complicated zig-zag pattern from here. Four more steps. I overhear a random kid laughing as his friend stretches the skin at the corner of his eyes in a downward slant and squints. I'm standing underneath a digital clock. Going on twenty minutes now. Only eternity left. I start thinking math is preferable to this. Who am I kidding? Of course it's not. Only one more person. Then, I'm in the front. A woman with a clipboard points to a chart on the wall six feet away and tells me to read the last and smallest line.

I stumble through B, that looks like a G, J, and Q. The woman pauses, peering over the top of her clipboard for the first time since asking my name, and then sighs. She asks me to cover my left eye and read the smallest line I can manage. I freeze because this is not what the people in front of me did. The girl behind me groans while the boy behind her mutters "figures." My left-hand feels detached from my body, sweaty, and all I want is to cover both my eyes just like the man in the Chinese idiom, yǎn ěr dào líng, does in the fable. It means to bury your head in the sand. The story is of a thief trying to steal a bell, but it rings before he can escape, so he covers his ears to muffle the sound, thinking no one else can hear it. This isn't a Chinese lesson, though, and everyone is watching. So for the first time, I'm aware that the smallest lines of letters are little more than a series of periods.

Dot. Dot. Dot. Is there no end?

In the game of hangman, I am the puppet whose eyes get erased first. Maybe I'm the one that erased them. My classmates get closer to dissecting the rest of me every time they guess the wrong words to fill in the spaces. They will probably never guess the right words. I just don't realize it yet.

At the end of the vision test, the woman with the clipboard delivers my death sentence. “Sweetheart, you need glasses.”

I get my first pair of glasses, a turquoise rectangle-framed abomination. However, I can’t deny how much everything becomes clearer, and not just visually. The clock doesn’t look like Pac-Man anymore. The billboard on my way to ballet class blows up the profile of the white man running against Obama for president, but I can read the words beside it now. “This is what a patriot looks like.” I notice that I’m one out of two Asian kids in my classes of twenty-four. Instead of blobs of color for faces, I can see the expressions people make even when they’re further than fifteen feet from me. When my family eats out, the gazes are not always kind. I’m suddenly smart with glasses in a way I wasn’t before.

“Hey, you do know the answer to problem five?” Chad asks from in front of me. Our fourth-grade class separated the desks into rows. We’re taking a math test.

“No.”

“Come on. You’re smart.” Does he even remember my name?

“Shut up.”

“Fine,” I don’t say anything, “goody-two-shoes.” We’re taking a test. I don’t know the answer to problem five. Years later, in a gym full of other Chinese kids I’ve grown up with, every time someone’s basketball misses the hoop, my best friend Hope jokes that it’s because their eyes are too small.

When I smile, she asks if I can see anything. I tell her she’s stupid. It’s not like she can see anything when she smiles, either. Then someone starts complaining that their parents won’t let them stop taking Chinese lessons or understand why they want a phone at fourteen. The second thing out of anyone’s mouth is that they’re such a Twinkie.

“Or a banana.”

In a chorus that everyone seems to know the words of, we sing, “Yellow on the outside, white on the inside.”

We keep making these jokes. Not because they’re funny, but because it feels like we own them now. They’re like vaccinations, small harmless injections that prevent hospitalization. So next time, when Chad shouts the same “joke” into the seventh-grade hallway, receiving a different kind of laughter, I don’t blink twice.

I get contacts sometime in fifth grade, ones that I can wear at night and not during the day. They work well enough, though sometimes I don't put them in right, or they're not in long enough, and then the rest of the day is as blurry as those first few months of second grade. Once I can see, the small things start making sense. Small things that I was too young to notice before or too blind. Sometime after I got glasses, I read the fine print that everyone skips over when they sign the contract to become an American, the words so tiny they make your eyes water. It's the fine print that hides the ugly truths in dense black font. It's the fine print camouflaged in a flowery language no one has the patience for. It's the fine print that tells you that to be American is to be white or be treated like a foreigner in your own home.

