

Multicultural Background: A Challenge or a Blessing?

I'm holding a box labeled "Differences." I'm not allowed to put it down, but that's OK. It's not that heavy. I take it with me to a friend's birthday party. Among the served dishes are hot dogs and barbecued chicken. Someone looks at my plate of salad and macaroni and asks, "Oh, are you vegetarian?" I quickly say no and begin explaining the definition of halal and why I cannot eat this specific meat. But wouldn't it just be easier to say I'm vegetarian, rather than having to explain every time?

I walk onto the tennis courts for a match, holding my box. I'm wearing a black t-shirt under my sleeveless blue uniform, and black leggings under a blue skirt. I'm thinking, *Does my outfit look weird?* It's a hot summer day, and I'm sweating before the match even starts. The other team is probably wondering why I'm wearing multiple layers in this 80-degree weather. They aren't aware that as a Muslim, modesty is very important to me and that I must cover myself at all times.

Our team is riding the bus to an away match. I didn't get the chance to go home and pray Dhuhr, the noon prayer. I move to a seat in the back, take my sneakers off, put my hijab on, and pray seated. *Is anyone watching me?* My box feels heavier than before.

It's the beginning of the school year, and I've met someone new. I tell them my name slowly and clearly, hoping they pronounce it correctly. "Is it Hannah?" *No, it's Hi-ra.* This goes on for at least 30 seconds, and I think, *Why do I have such a strange and unfamiliar name?* My arms start to ache but I don't put the box down.

I was born here, but my parents weren't. Therefore it has been a great challenge for me to accommodate my parents' culture into my life along with my American culture. Living as a minority comes with the risk of a loss of culture and heritage. Fortunately, I was able to preserve these things. My parents made sure to teach us all about our religion, and we attend the Islamic Society of Carroll County every weekend to maintain and strengthen our faith.

I've always tried to be the best version of myself because at an early age I realized people see me as a representation of all Muslims. I enjoy answering questions about my religion and culture, with friends asking to see me pray and teachers inquiring about Ramadan. Since I have exposure to different cultures, I have the ability to look at issues from multiple angles.

As I grew older I realized my challenges turned out to be blessings. They've given me a unique ability to view the world through multiple perspectives, which is an essential part of my identity. Because of my experiences, I'm comfortable with adapting to uncertain situations. I've become more open-minded and fearless and realized that no matter what obstacles I may face, my religion and identity come first. Embracing this mindset has allowed me to put my box down and be more self-confident, which is why I will make a good fit at my chosen college.

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