

Sophia Lake

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Finally Feeling Comfortable in my Skin

"What IS that?" I remember hearing as I opened my lunch, packed by my mom, on the first day of elementary school, excited to eat after what felt like an eternity of learning simple addition and subtraction in class. As I was pulling out all my favorite foods; dried seaweed snacks, kimchi, and Yakult—a delicious Japanese yogurt drink, I heard one of my peers at the same table field the question. I looked at them and answered without blinking an eye, my mouth watering as I was ready to devour my delicious lunch. That was when I was met with comments like "Ewww, why is it that color" or "something smells" and noticed just how different everyone else's lunches were. As I looked down the table, I saw sandwiches, apple slices, chips, and more. I heard my peers bargaining; "I'll trade you my Rice Crispy Treat for your Doritos," and so I tried to join in to see if I could swap for a more "normal" lunch, even though I was eager to eat the one my mom had packed for me. I tried to bargain with my friends and was met with no success; no one wanted my food because "seaweed grows in the ocean," and my kimchi was too weirdly colored. After that lunch experience and the adverse reactions from my peers, I made it clear to my mom early on that I did not want Korean food (or any Asian food at all) packed in my lunch, instead begging for Lunchables or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches so that I could be "normal" like the other kids.

Growing up in a predominantly white town as a biracial woman (half Korean and half White), it was evident that I was different. I tried to hide my Korean culture and assimilate more to my white side, doing my makeup to hide or distract from my almond-shaped eyes, avoiding

eating Asian food (all, not just Korean), and making sure my middle name—JeHong, was never shared with anyone. My Korean grandparents attempted to teach my sister and me their native language; however, when I heard snickers and saw smirks from my classmates as they greeted us at the end of the school day, I refused to respond in Korean, instead offering English responses.

My concern for environmental issues came early in life. My Dad made sure that my sister and I spent much of our time growing up outside, whether it be hiking, camping, or our favorite activity, watching the tadpoles grow into frogs in the small creek behind our house. Every spring, my sister and I would rush to the creek to see if we spotted any tadpoles. Each year, we noticed the water dwindling until, at a certain point, there was no more water left. After seeing the direct impact of the California drought, my passion for sustainability and environmentalism took hold. I started attending climate change rallies in Los Angeles and researching ways to live more sustainably. After taking an environmental studies course in high school, I decided to follow a lower impact vegetarian diet. Although my mom was supportive of it, she was also solemn about my new dietary restriction. I did not fully realize why until later on—with my new declaration of vegetarianism, I lost a lot of authentic Korean food options.

Only until coming to college and being exposed to many more different cultures and identities, did I feel comfortable welcoming my Korean identity. Here at UC Santa Barbara, I saw peers who were proud of their cultures, eager to share them with me through music, food, and more. I spent so much time trying to hide this identity that it felt so refreshing to just be myself without being outcast as "different" or "weird." Finally, I felt confident enough to begin cooking Korean food in my apartment and sharing it with friends. I started diversifying my narrative and realized that my passion for the planet was missing an intersectional piece and that climate crises affect different communities disproportionately. So, along with my sustainable life

changes, I thought about action items to create a difference in the community. One important project I am currently focusing on is bringing back a reusable container program on campus. Students typically call Isla Vista home for four years, and because they are not permanent residents, they sometimes hold a specific mentality that they can trash this lovely beach town and not reap the consequences. However, families also call Isla Vista home and do not have the luxury to move away if it becomes inhabitable and littered with trash. Hopefully, I can work with campus partners and find organizations just as passionate about combating the trash problem in IV to restart this program and reduce our single-use plastic use.

Once I started accepting my biracial identity and learning more about social injustices, both in and outside the classroom, I knew I had to get involved in the fight for equality somehow. I looked back at my own life experiences and remembered that feeling of being an outsider. Recounting that experience and the associated feeling, I knew I wanted to help foster inclusive and welcoming spaces for all. With that idea in mind, I started volunteering to get people registered to vote to have their voices heard. I also looked at the organizations that I was a part of at UCSB. When I was first entering as a young freshman, I decided to join a Panhellenic sorority. At the time, it made perfect sense; I had seen all of my peers from high school go on to join sororities and have a great time in college. Looking back on that decision, I see that yearning for a sense of belonging and acceptance to an organization and community built on ideas of white supremacy and historically valued exclusion. After coming to that realization, I struggled with my morals and identity for a while but decided that if I have played such an active role in my organization thus far, I should stay and work to break down more barriers to entry and foster a more inclusive environment. I got involved on the Panhellenic Council, the governing body for the sororities on campus. First, I started as the VP of Marketing, where I made sure to accurately

represent the members of our organizations on our social media platforms, not just posting pictures of the "typical" sorority woman. The Instagram account had over 3000 followers, and so I utilized that platform to highlight various social justice issues like voter rights/registration, disparities in COVID impact among communities, critical environmental issues, and more with the overall goal of informing and educating our members and making the community a safer and more inclusive space. I am currently President of the Panhellenic Community, and my priority is still making the community welcoming to all. Within my term, I have worked with the council to eliminate collecting potential new members' pictures as that leads to more image-based recruitment, created a new education officer position to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, partnered with the Isla Vista Community Service District to bring a community vaccine clinic in, and more. Although I am still pushing back on certain things, like our national's decision to table a vote to allow non-binary and gender non-conforming members into our organizations, I know that I have my community's support in these fights. The most rewarding part of this position is watching emerging leaders with shared interests and passion about making a difference, growing and doing better than our institution has historically been.

As I reflect on my upbringing thus far, I understand why I am so passionate about fighting and raising awareness about intersectional environmental injustices and fostering a welcoming space where everyone feels accepted. My lived experiences have shaped my values and molded me into the person I am today. I had never fully felt as though I belonged in the spaces I existed in; therefore, my main focus is creating a space where everyone feels seen, and their voices heard. Because I grew up in a predominantly white area and am used to existing in white spaces, I have been and want to continue applying my experience to have conversations with people to raise awareness of issues that do not directly impact them. If an individual has

enough passion for creating change, they can find like-minded people to rally together and foster a sense of community to create that change. If I have learned anything thus far, it is that in order to create change most effectively, support in numbers is vital, and help is always welcome. In the future, I hope to continue working with sororities to break down exclusionary and harmful rules and regulations and either enter the world of policymaking or nonprofit work to advocate for environmental justice.