Growing Up Through My Eyes

From the first day of pre-school to the present day, I am asked about my hair on a daily basis. Everyone wants to touch, play, or pull on my hair to watch the curls bounce back for their own amusement. From a young age, I knew I was different and that everyone around me was interested to find out. From questions of “Are you a mix?” to “Who gives you your colouring and hair type?” I had to find out myself in order to know how to answer the question.

Dating all the way back to pre-school where the highlight of the day was playing on the playground, that’s when I noticed something was different. Although I was too young to really know and more focused on who can do the monkey bars the fastest, my subconscious was starting to become aware. From drop-offs to pick-ups I never struggled to find my dad; whereas, my mom tended to blend more into the crowd of parents hoarding the door every day. As I grew older, classes became more diverse and I started to figure things out, or at least I thought I did. Then Elementary school came along, and things slowly started to click. With my parents still not explaining to me why I was different the family drawings I was bringing home were saying otherwise. My mom kept this drawing to show me when I grew older and when I saw it I was more confused than she was expecting. “Don’t you remember drawing this?” she said.

“No, I don’t actually, why are you showing me?” I asked.

With a smile on her face and slight tears coming to her eyes she replied, “To show you that without us having to explain to you why you are the way you are, you drew every little detail possible”. I stopped to think; I guess my mom was right. I don’t remember much from when I was very little; obviously, the stories I was told were surprising to me.

Now looking at the present, it's clear to see how my life growing up has been a little different than some. I will never forget this one day in particular: it was a Saturday afternoon, nothing out of the ordinary. My mother and I were heading off to our nail appointment at the same salon but this time there were different people working. We sit down and were handed all the colours. As we sit next to each other the first thing my mom’s nail tech asks her is “Is this your friend?”. My mom looked and me with wide eyes and responded with “No this is my daughter”. I couldn’t believe it. I’ll give you a quick description of my mom, so you have an idea: she’s tall, blonde, fair skinned with straight hair and for anyone who knows me, they know that we don’t exactly look alike. My dad, on the other hand, is: black and bald, with an athletic structure. Whenever people see us together there is no mistaking I’m his daughter.

As I got older, I became more and more curious about my background; I wanted to know what exactly I was a mix of so when people asked I was able to give them a correct answer. Now that I was in Middle School my parents figured it was the right time. The conversation is still clear as day to me. We were sat down at a family dinner one night, my dad spoke up during the silence of all of us chewing and said “Ryland, Chelsea you know you are half black right?”. My brother and I looked at each other. We responded with a quiet “yea” and our mom looking at us with a worried look on her face but then sighed with relief. My brother and I have never looked at ourselves differently and my parents didn’t feel it was something that defined us, so they were waiting to see if we would ever ask. Of course, I didn’t let that define me because no matter what my background was I knew who I was and wanted to be so that’s all the mattered to me.

Something I’ve never thought about until recently was how all of this would make my mom feel. She has two kids and only one out of the two has a slight resemblance of her. It also doesn’t help that my mom never changed her last name giving us havoc crossing the border at times where she is asked the same question every time: “Mrs. Setchell how’re you related to this family?” in a deep officer voice. She responds with the usual “I’m their mother”. Nobody likes being asked that question. Just looking at a family photo it’s safe to say that my family is what we like to call a rainbow of different colours and hair types. My brother is six feet four inches, tallest in the family. There have been times where I’ve been asked if I was his girlfriend. Really? I know we don’t look that much alike but that’s just a weird statement to have to respond to. Especially now that we are older and growing into ourselves it's becoming more and more common sadly.

My background is now becoming a strong part of who I am because I am a believer in family first and that everyone needs to embrace who they are inside and out. Of course, there have been times around friends where words have been said that make me feel uncomfortable because of their nature and how wrong they are being used in everyday conversation. I am more confident in my genetic make-up now then I have been in a while and for people who don’t know what it’s like growing up being one of the only few in your class with curly hair or even just a darker colouring than most let me tell you, it’s not easy. Young children are very curious and don’t always know how to ask the right questions. I always did my best to not take any questions too personally, but it was still easier said than done. I’m not saying that my life was overly difficult, but it was a little different than most based on my experiences and questions I had to face at a young age. I’m thankful all these experiences have shaped who I am today because I wouldn’t want to be anyone else and I am proud of my heritage.