

I Chose not to Become a Victim, but a Success Story

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I went from being part of the majority to becoming a minority in one smooth plane ride. Growing up in Puerto Rico everyone looked like me, talked, and acted like I did; I was part of the majority. Consequently, I didn't think much about my identity until I decided to study in the United States.

My first year at UMass, Amherst was brutal. Then, during a meeting with a professor I was told about a program for people like *me*. I wasn't sure what he meant by people like me but I was desperate for help, so I listened. It was called the Minority Engineering Program (MEP). It was as if someone had slapped me. That day, after that one conversation, I became aware of my new minority status. Of course I had heard the term minority before, who hadn't? However, it had never applied to me. As I walked to the MEP office, all I could think was, when did I become a minority? Unbeknownst to me, I had become a minority the moment that plane landed in Boston. I had always been a fan of the colloquial phrase "Ignorance is bliss", but now I prefer "The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off" (Anonymous, n.d.).

All of a sudden everything changed, but in reality, I was the only one who had changed. Knowing I was a minority changed me, my perspective, and my mood. I learned to be a member of the minority, a member of the group I was assigned to, and I learned to adapt. I had a new perspective and I was seeing things through a new lens. A social construction others created for me, one that dictated what they saw when they looked at me. I lived in someone else's reality of myself. This was a crucial moment in which I wrestled with rejecting

the notion of being a minority and internalizing it at the same time. Moreover, in order to understand my new identity I isolated myself. I created invisible walls that protected me while I could figure it all out.

Once the initial shock died down, I was able to refocus. After all, I still needed help achieving my goals. I wanted to be strong, but I also needed to be smart. My goal was to become an engineer - minority status or not, so that's what I set out to do. Ironically enough my minority status saved me by allowing me to tap into programs like the MEP.

Once the academic part of my identity was in place I noticed other parts followed. I was learning to understand and build different aspects of my persona. I started to create a new identity for myself, one that would allow me to thrive in my new reality. Once again the MEP stepped up to the plate, it was there where I found peace. The acceptance of staff members and students added a whole new component to my life. It allowed my social identity to blossom. I had finally found a much-welcomed sense of comradery. The MEP was my safe place, a place where I was a Puerto Rican in control of my identity and my destiny, a non-minority in a minority's world.

I am Puerto Rican. In the country I chose to live I am perceived as a racial minority, it is my reality. I have accepted the label, I have learned to live with it, and I have risen to its challenges. While I understand it, there is a part of me that wants to push it back. There is a part of me that still needs to feel I am no one's minority. Take me as I am, love me for my merits or hate me for my shortcomings, but do it for me the person, not because of my race.

I thought that being considered a minority didn't define the woman I have become, but that simply is not true. Being considered a minority presented situations that allowed me to first form and then strengthen my new, more elaborate identity. As a result, I formed a better me. My identity has played a major part in the way I conduct myself, make decisions, and go after my dreams. It has impacted my successes, failures, and college experiences. The truth is opportunities are always there for the taking, it was always my choice. I chose not to become a victim, but a success story.

References

Anonymous, (n.d.). [Pinterest board post]. Retrieved from

<https://www.pinterest.com/lucyc1224/ignorance-is-bliss/>