

# REALITIES

THIRTEENTH ISSUE



A Cross-Cultural Publication From North Hennepin Community College



# REALITIES

North Hennepin Community College Publication  
of Student Writing for Sharing of Cross-Cultural Experiences

Thirteenth Issue, Academic Year 2020 – 2021

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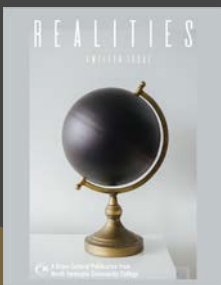
Mark L. Larson and Don Wendel  
Founders

Realities is published annually  
For Submission Instructions and Guidelines, please visit:  
[www.nhcc.edu/realities](http://www.nhcc.edu/realities)

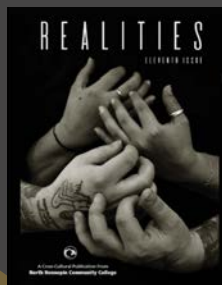
Note from the editor –  
To preserve the authenticity and character of the writings, they have been minimally edited.

Original publication cover art photography by Patrick Fore, [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com)  
Cover and publication design by Orit Kidron

Realities is dedicated to all people who have had the courage  
to cross over their boundaries, thereby enriching their lives by  
seeing how other lives are lived.



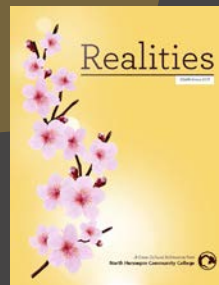
Twelfth Issue 2020



Eleventh Issue 2019



Tenth Issue 2018



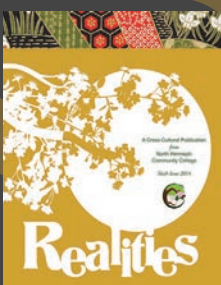
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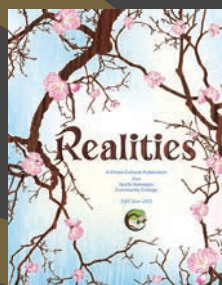
Eighth Issue 2016



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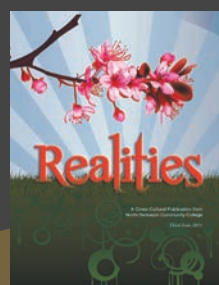
Sixth Issue 2014



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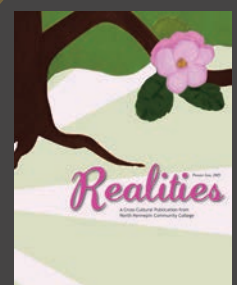
Fourth Issue 2012



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WE THANK THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE FOR THEIR  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO AND SUPPORT OF THIS  
PUBLICATION:

Brigid Bechtold  
Ann Besser  
Margie Campbell Charlebois  
Emeka Emekezie  
Heidi Farrah  
Kaelie Farrah  
DeeGee Frenzel  
Rolando García  
Liz Hogenson  
Orit Kidron  
Lisa LaMere  
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Jesse Mason  
Michael McGehee  
Anthony Miller  
Sara Mitchell  
Ana Munro  
Susan Nyhus  
Kara Olson  
Vanessa Ramos  
Katie Rauk  
Becki Schwartz  
Nancy Shih-Knodel  
Izzy Vang  
Lisa Whalen  
Leanne Zainer

All the students who submitted writings  
All others who promoted the mission of this  
publication



# INTRODUCTION

I'm writing this introduction in January of 2022, just about two years after the COVID-19 pandemic began, and I think we can all agree that, at the very least, it's been a challenging time. In Minnesota, and right here in our community, we've dealt with tragedy, much of which has made it into national conversations on police and racial violence. Within that time, though, I've had the privilege of digging into the writing that you're just about to delve into, writing that demonstrates both creative excellence and a depth of honesty—with joy, with pain, with confusion, with love—that keeps us buoyant. The talk of tragedy and loss, though, wouldn't be complete without acknowledging that which has specifically befallen us at Realities: last winter, my friend, colleague, and Realities co-editor Karen Carr passed away. She has left a legacy here—at North Hennepin, at Realities—that cannot be replaced; it's a weight we carry at all times. We all have much to say about Karen, but I'll keep it simple—she is missed. This issue is dedicated to her.

**Sincerely,  
Brian Baumgart**





## A Cultural Awakening

*By Wendy Loayes Ortega*

**M**y parents always told me that I had two different cultures. One of them is my Mexican culture that is rich and beautiful. They have amazing food with different spices and herbs. They have a lot of different styles of music and they are very diverse. They were indigenous people that were mixed with the Spaniards, so they lost some of their culture. I am also part of the Guatemalan culture. They both seem to be similar, but they are very different. They have different foods, clothing, and even language. Not only do Guatemalans speak Spanish, but they have many different Mayan dialects. They are more indigenous than Mexico. The part of Guatemala where I'm from was not even touched by the Spaniards.

Apart from this, I was not always proud to be Guatemalan. But one trip made me change the way I looked at the Guatemalan culture and made me proud to have them as my cultures. On the summer of July 2016, I told my parents I wanted to go to Mexico to visit my grandparents and my aunts and uncles. They told me that I had to go by myself because they couldn't go. I was okay with that. Later, my parents told me that my aunts were really busy. They couldn't take me in their house, so I couldn't go to Mexico. But they told me I could go to Guatemala. At first, I didn't want to. I couldn't imagine being over there by myself. I would be bored and feel out of place. But I gave it some thought, and I would rather be miserable and bored in another country than stay home all summer bored. They bought me a plane ticket and I was sent away.

When I arrived in Guatemala City, I was surprised. They had a lot of mountains. They were large and they looked fresh. After greeting my family members whom I've never met before, we stepped out of the airport. The air smelt like gasoline and dirt. I didn't like it. We had to take a bus to go to Quetzaltenango,

where I was staying. It would take us 4 hours with lots of twist and turns from the mountain to get there. I slept through most of it.

Finally, we made it to Quetzaltenango. I was relieved. The air still smelt like gasoline, but I was getting used to it. I met all of my family members and my grandparents. I was surprised I was actually happy there. The first thing I noticed about my family is that they dressed different than people do in the US. The women weren't wearing shirts or jeans. Instead they had their traditional clothing on. Back then I didn't know what it was, but I do now. They were wearing Huipils and Cortes. The Huipils were these blouses made by hand and embroidered with different designs. They are very colorful and beautiful. Each one was different and there were many styles. The Cortes are the bottom part that form like a long skirt that goes down to their ankles. Together they are beautiful, and the colors are vibrant. They always match them together. A couple of days passed, and my aunts wanted to put me in their traditional clothing. I didn't want to at first, but I thought I'd give it a try. When I had the Corte and huipil on it felt uncomfortable. And itchy, I didn't like it. But I wore them anyways. I liked seeing the smile on their faces when I wore it. I actually started to like them. I admired the artwork they made. My aunts would tell me how they make them. Many women use a loom to make them; Then they had embroidered flowers and animals and other designs to them. They used many different colors to these clothing. I liked wearing bright ones.

Another unusual thing I noticed is that they speak a Mayan dialect. I always knew they spoke another language because that is what my dad would tell me. But I didn't know that this dialect was the default language. By that I mean they speak that language to each other



more than they do Spanish. I didn't understand what they were saying but I understood how my parents felt when I would speak English with my siblings, and they wouldn't understand. Slowly I started understanding some phrases they would say in that language. I was happy that I could blend in there. I looked like everyone else. Many people thought I have lived there for a while. I felt at home.

The food there was alright. Some things I didn't really like but other things were amazing. I grew up with my mom cooking Mexican food, so I was used to eating that. I didn't think that the food would be really different than Mexico. One difference is that in Guatemala they didn't eat spicy food; they weren't used to it. I didn't really think they had a lot of flavor but not all the food was like that. I did enjoy the street food. They had tacos, fried chicken, hamburgers, pizza, and they had a lot of fruits that were fresh. They didn't have McDonalds or a KFC, but they had small family owned food trucks that had all those kinds of street food. I loved it.

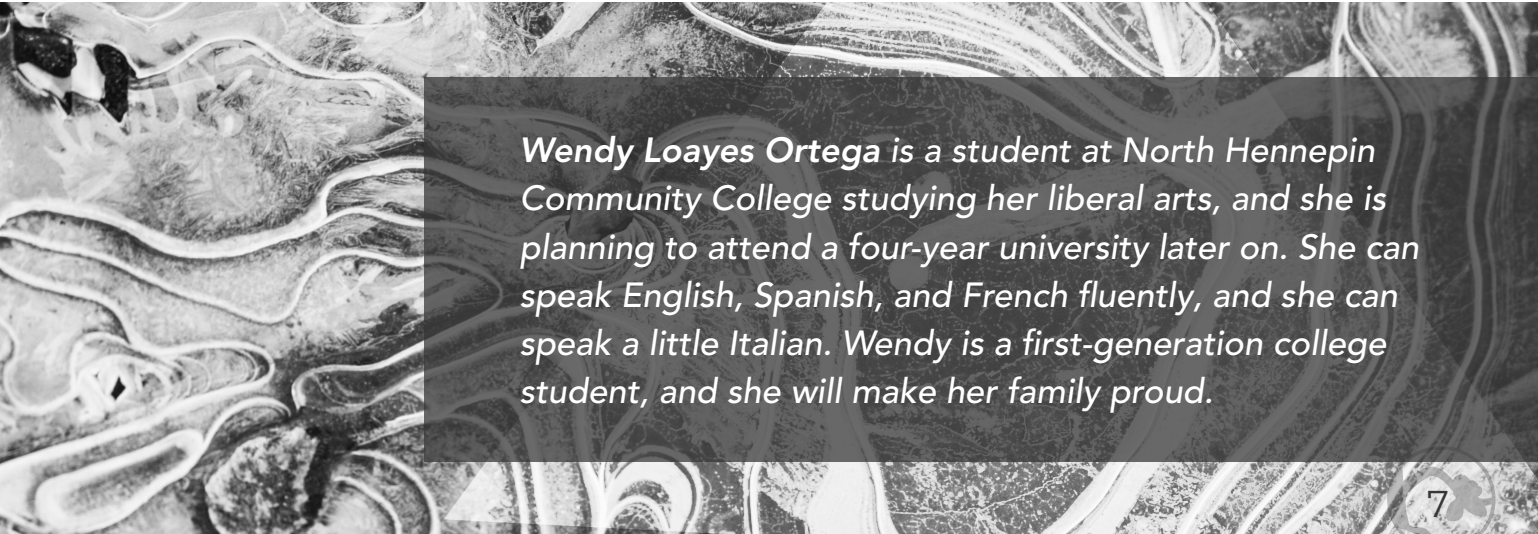
I spent a whole month in Guatemala. I had so much fun and I learned a lot from that trip. I realized how beautiful their culture was and the people were nice. When I would go to the store with my aunts or cousins everybody greeted each other. They all knew each other. So, I would always greet everybody even if I didn't know them. They would sometimes have a small conversation with me, and they were friendly. I learned a lot about the Mayan culture and their beliefs. They had amazing stories to

tell about how they came to that town.

When I finally came back to the US in the end of the August, I was different. Not only by my skin that got tanner or coming here skinnier, but mentally I felt different. I felt like a different person. I came back to the US dressed in the traditional Mayan clothes and I felt beautiful. I got a lot of stares because I was different, but I didn't care. I felt proud to wear the colorful and handmade clothing with some beads and embroidered flowers. I was happy to see my parents again, but I was sad I would leave my aunt, grandparents and cousins. But I knew I would see them again soon.

Adjusting back to the US took about a week. I was back to my normal bored self. I couldn't go to the store, or hangout with my cousins, or go out to eat. I missed Guatemala a lot. I gained so much from going there. I learned more respect for people older than me, more responsibility in doing my chores, and trying new foods. The biggest thing I learned was to finally embrace my culture. I realized how special and beautiful it actually was. People would ask me if I was Mexican and I would always say "yes, I'm just Mexican." But after that trip when people asked me if I'm Mexican I would always say "yes but I'm also half Guatemalan."

I have truly embraced my Guatemalan side and since then I have visited them multiple times. And I will continue to visit them and explore more of my Guatemalan roots.



*Wendy Loayes Ortega is a student at North Hennepin Community College studying her liberal arts, and she is planning to attend a four-year university later on. She can speak English, Spanish, and French fluently, and she can speak a little Italian. Wendy is a first-generation college student, and she will make her family proud.*





## Surviving Our Flight

By Abshir Mohamed

I was sitting on the porch of my house enjoying the late afternoon warm sunshine when my mom suddenly called me to help her pack my clothes. My mother and I got a call from my father asking me to get prepared to travel out of the country. Standing from where I was sitting and heading toward to my mom, I eventually believed the fact that I was no longer going to be living with my mom anymore. As a result of my parent's divorce, my father decided to immigrate with me to Ethiopia. We were seeking safety from the civil wars and terrorism that was rampant in Somalia.

Once we came to Ethiopia, we found peace but faced poverty. My father could not financially support me. Instead of sending me back, he left me with my aunt who lived in a refugee camp. Luckily, the public schools were free, and I began my elementary school as a first-grade student. I spent five years living in the refugee camp before I was finally given the opportunity to move with my aunt to the United States of America.

The flight attendant was standing a couple of steps away and facing toward me as he was demonstrating the pre-flight safety. I fastened my seat belt as the plane dove into the air. I was seated with my family together in one row, which consisted of our four leather seats. We were flying our first-time flight from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to Seattle, Washington. Our reservations included a connection in Frankfurt and a stop in Chicago before we finally arrived in Seattle.

We were concerned with the airline food such that it may be contaminated with a food prohibited by our religion. Mom brought us homemade food: chapati made with edible oil and eggs, and a plate-sized sweet pancake which is perfect for breakfast or as snack anytime during the day.

We were on the line for security screening at the airport security of Chicago. The security man dressed in a well-fitting blue shirt with tie on and black trousers checked all of us and our carry-on bags. He opened our handbags and disposed of our lotions and the foods to the recycle bin. As we were taking our shoes off, my aunt said, unbelievably, "Those are our belongings." The man looked up at her as if he did not understand what she said and pointed to go through the screening door.

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After I passed the checkpoint, I tried to grab the lotions hanging in the recycle bin. The security man told me that I cannot take it because it is illegal to bring them to the United States of

America. The only food we saved to survive was now gone. The lotions were gifts from my sister, and now, before we even opened them, they were disposed of to the recycle bin. I felt like we were losing everything we got from relatives or from the country we left. Were we bringing drugs or poisons to the country? After the disappointment at the airport security, we had to wait for hours until the airplane departed. We boarded the last airplane, which would take us to our final journey destination. We felt exhausted and hungry. My stomach rumbled like I'd eaten poison.


We arrived at the Seattle Airport. I glanced over a clock hanging over a coffee shop; it read 2:00 AM. All of us did not have any idea about where to head. We walked across the gateway. People got out of a nearby elevator. "There they are," said sister Amal who was waiting for us at the airport. After pleasant hugs and warm welcome, giving us relief from the long and exhausting journey, we got our luggage



to a minivan and drove to our new home. The weather looked nice. The lights on the streets reflected the rainwater, and it looked like the pavement was lighting up. We were out of energy like an airplane that has run out of fuel. When we got home, Amal prepared us a full table of food. It was so delicious; we ate like prisoners who had just gotten out of jail.

Traveling internationally for the first time was a challenge and a discomfort. From our first

flight experience, I learned that every airport has regulations to follow, and most airports have the strictest laws in place to ensure the safety of the travelers. From that day on, I pack any lotions containing liquid in my luggage even though some people including me fly as if they may never see their luggage again, and that has some merit. I keep in my carry-on the minimum of what I need to survive if I lose my luggage. Also, while traveling, I save some stock of cash in my pocket.



*Abshir Mohamed is pursuing an Associate of Science in Pre-Engineering degree at North Hennepin Community College.*





## The Act of Acceptance

By Amanda Chamoun

I believe that the greatest wholehearted act a human can commit is the deed of acceptance. All people on this planet come from various backgrounds, religions, and traditions that shape us all into who we are as humans.

Coming from a different background than the predominantly white population I was surrounded by, I was taught as a young child that you should always accept others physically, mentally, and spiritually for who they are. Even if they can't accept you for the person you are. I live by this every day, who am I to judge a beautiful creation of God? Better yet, who am I to judge one of God's children that I know better than anyone in this universe, myself.

Everyone has something about them that is considered to be unique, that one characteristic that makes a being original. Mine, is my hair. I couldn't stand my hair. I could never comprehend why this lion's mane on top of my head was so drastically different than every other girl's long, sleek, straighter-than-a-line hair. I would try everything there was to tame my biggest insecurity. High ponytails, blow drying it out, braids. Not to mention I even took the liberty of moussing it all down, just so the volume of my hair wouldn't cave out to surprise the world around me. I was embarrassed. Embarrassed by the thick, charcoal-colored, Arabian hair my parents had passed down to me. Above all, I was ashamed by the coiled, coconut-scented curls that dripped down my scalp into a spiral of humiliation. It seemed I could never get away from my self-consciousness.

Why do we as individuals tend to hate qualities about one's self? Psychologists Dr. Robert and Lisa Firestone found in their research that "the most common self-critical thought among a diverse population of subjects tested is "You are different from other people." Most people see themselves as different, not in

some positive or special way, but in a negative sense. Even people who seem well-adjusted and well-liked in their social circles have deep-seated feelings of being an outcast or a fraud" (PsychAlive, 2017). My hair made me perceive I wasn't accepted, that I wasn't socially ideal.

I was surrounded by straight hair all my adolescent life. I began to think that was the only way to be considered "beautiful."

I remember a time back in the 4th grade when all the students and I were going out to recess after lunch. We did our required daily lap around the track, but everyone would cut through the field when the teachers didn't have our undivided attention. My friends and I would soon sprint to the swings and call dibs on the royal blue swing that everyone wanted to get their hands on. As I was swinging, I reflected that I had never been that high up off the ground before, and soon, my eyes met with the brightening yet almost blinding effect of the sun. That brightness soon turned into dullness when I felt a drop of water land on my cracked top lip. All of a sudden, it started to pour down on the kids of Sand Creek Elementary.

Metal on the swings became slippery, dirt was being transformed into mud, wood chips on the playground turned into a soft, dark brown object that lost its ability to scrape your knee. All my friends with straight hair were dancing in the rainfall, all-around joyous it was showering. They loved it. I, on the other hand, could only ponder about how my hair was going to get ruined.

I rushed to get inside the school, arms over my hair attempting to cover it from its greatest enemy. I began bolting to the bathroom to fix my ponytail, only to see three other curly-haired girls submerged in water in the bathroom mirror saying, "Do you think the rain messed up my hair?" At that moment, I knew I wasn't the only one with this dilemma. Nikki



Walton, blogger on naturally curly, digs deep into why natural haired girls are more prone to hate their hair. She sheds light on the idea “that occurs when women decide to go natural. We are confronted by the appearance of our hair—the texture, the curl pattern, the way the light hits the strands, the colour, the density, etc. But that’s just the surface. The emotion that goes along with natural hair is real and sometimes raw. We remember how we may have been made fun of when we were younger by children of either our same ethnicity or other ethnicities, for having nappy, kinky hair” (Walton, 2013).

My sixth, as well as halfway through my seventh-grade year, you would have never guessed I had curls. Four out of the seven days of the week were dedicated only to straightening my hair. I spent approximately two hours every other night trapped in my compacted upstairs bathroom, completely and utterly surrounded by pure heat. I became so obsessed with the way I was viewed that I was willing to hide a huge part of my identity, the aspect of myself that made me unique. All just to fit in. Some people would first brush their teeth, eat breakfast, or use the restroom as soon as they wake up. Not me. My impulse was to grab the squeaky, grey fold-up chair from my laundry room and head straight to the nearest bathroom. I’d flat iron any waves I would see and made sure my hair was entirely curl-free. I suppose the smell of burnt four-hundred-degree hair was what woke me up in the morning.

By the time I reached my seventh-grade year, I grew tired. I was exhausted from waking up at 6 a.m. with bags under my eyes. Weary of the ceaseless yawns throughout the day, all while consistently being cautious when it came to my hair. All I ever desired was to experience a day without the thought of “Is my hair okay?” I wanted a change, I yearned for it. I suddenly began to question everything I ever believed. Do I really need straight hair to feel good about myself? Whenever I would run my fingers through my hair, it was brittle. My hair wasn’t soft and glossy like it previously was when I


was a child. I had split ends and even with the lightest stroke I’d lose approximately about five strands of hair. My lion’s mane didn’t smell of coconut like it once did, it reeked of burnt ceramic.

Author Robert Holden states in his book *Happiness Now!* that “Happiness and self-acceptance go hand in hand. In fact, your level of self-acceptance determines your level of happiness. The more self-acceptance you have, the more happiness you’ll allow yourself to accept, receive, and enjoy. In other words, you enjoy as much happiness as you believe you’re worthy of” (Leon F Seltzer Ph.D., 2008). Being so young, I didn’t have any recognition of what I was doing or the message I was displaying. In my mind, I was just straightening my hair, nothing more, nothing less. But in reality, I was damaging my hair as well as my self-esteem. I knew what I needed to do. The path to happiness and self-acceptance could only be accomplished if I embraced my biggest insecurity, and made it my own superpower.

I wore my hair curly for the first time, after two years of wearing it straight. After an hour, and half a bottle of conditioner later, I got my hair to a manageable state. I reminisce about the time I just stared in the mirror, on the verge of tears, because I absolutely despised what I was looking at.

For 730 days I attempted to hide my hair from the world, imitating something and or someone that I wasn’t. Now, here I am seeing my curls flourish in my reflection and I grew more and more disoriented towards my head of hair. All I ever knew was that straight, sleek hair meant beautiful, while tight, frizzy coils were associated with the terms “nappy” or “unflattering.” As young curly-headed girls, we were taught this because of what surrounded us. In an article published by Sorella, writer Briyana Scott explains just why we assume straight hair is what’s ideal. “The media seems to only want to perpetuate images of women with straight, long hair. These women are uplifted as the standard of femininity and how





a woman should present herself. Even when we see the tightly coiled 4c texture (which is incredibly rare!), it is usually extremely long. Unfortunately, society has attached words like “difficult” and “ugly” to kinky hair, and “soft, beautiful and feminine” to straight hair. Words mean things and we need to reinforce what we know” (Scott, 2020). I straightened my hair to feel accepted in my community, to feel as though I wasn’t an outcast. But, to showcase my hair naturally, could only mean I would never be accepted or be considered beautiful. Right?

I demanded the world to see my “new” hair. I decided the perfect opportunity to do so, would be at school. I came to terms with the fact that there would be a spotlight over my head as soon as I walk through those doors. But I didn’t care. I needed to do this, I had to realize my path to acceptance wasn’t going to be an easy trail. It requires steps and this one, was one of the biggest I ever had to take. I put my words into existence and followed through with it the next morning.

To this day I’ve never gotten praised for something with such positive feedback in my life. “Is that your natural hair, Amanda?! It’s so pretty.” “Why have you never worn it like that before?” “OMG, I love your hair!” Everyone adored my curls. I gained compliments from almost every individual within the establishment. Even from teachers, I had throughout the years, or not. It’s somewhat ironic, I believed having straight hair would mean I could ultimately be happy and have a sense of belonging. But that whole day, I couldn’t begin to stop smiling while getting attention from people I did and or didn’t personally know. Writer Hannah Rose, from PsychAlive, is a firm believer in finding one’s self-love. She notes that we as humans need to “Give yourself the gift of self-love. You can’t accept anyone else’s love if you don’t believe you’re worthy of it, anyway. Stop seeking outside of yourself for anything to fill the gaping void inside of you that only you can fill” (Rose, 2019). I began to feel more confident than I ever did when my hair was straightened. I searched extensively for my acceptance, only to find it

in the spot I’d least consider. Enough was this fake, unhappy persona. I found myself, I finally felt like me.

My biggest insecurity resulted in being my most cherished characteristic. I hated my thick, texturized, poofy hair, and sought out my opportunity for acceptance in all the wrong places. I hid an immense trait about myself from the world, that made me lose sight of who I truly was. I’ve accepted that I am not defined as what society thinks is “beautiful.” Yes, straight hair is captivating, but so is every strand of frizz that comes forth on my head. It’s taken me four years to come to terms with it, and I will take on four more years just to project how much I’ve grown. A young, naive version of myself would have never thought the words “I love my hair” could have ever been projected from my mouth. But, I am proud to not only say that, yet also promise myself to continue to love my hair, as that is what makes me unique.

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*No biography provided.*



## 7 Stages of Grief

By Zainab Ahmed

**T**wo weeks ago, I found out a friend of mine had passed away in June. She was sixteen. Her name was Priya\*, and she was one of the funniest people I had ever met. Don't ask me how I didn't realize she was dead. Believe me, I ask myself the same thing. My heart sinks to my feet every time I go onto her twitter and see her last tweets. How did I not see that? In my head, I know I shouldn't be guilty, but isn't guilt one of the seven stages of grief?

Five months. It took me five months to put two and two together and figure out that that is who Maya\* was grieving. To figure out that is why Priya hadn't tweeted recently. I didn't attend her funeral, because Priya now lives in Sweden. Well, lived. I still have trouble differentiating the past and the present because it still feels as if this is one cruel, terrible joke, and tomorrow I'll wake up to a text from her. I know I won't, but a girl can hope, right? I can think of a hundred reasons why everyone thinks she's dead. Maybe she wanted to start a new life in Cambodia so she faked her death and once we turn eighteen she'll contact us again. Maybe. I sound insane. She wouldn't have us all grieve for nothing. But maybe I didn't know her as well as I thought I did.

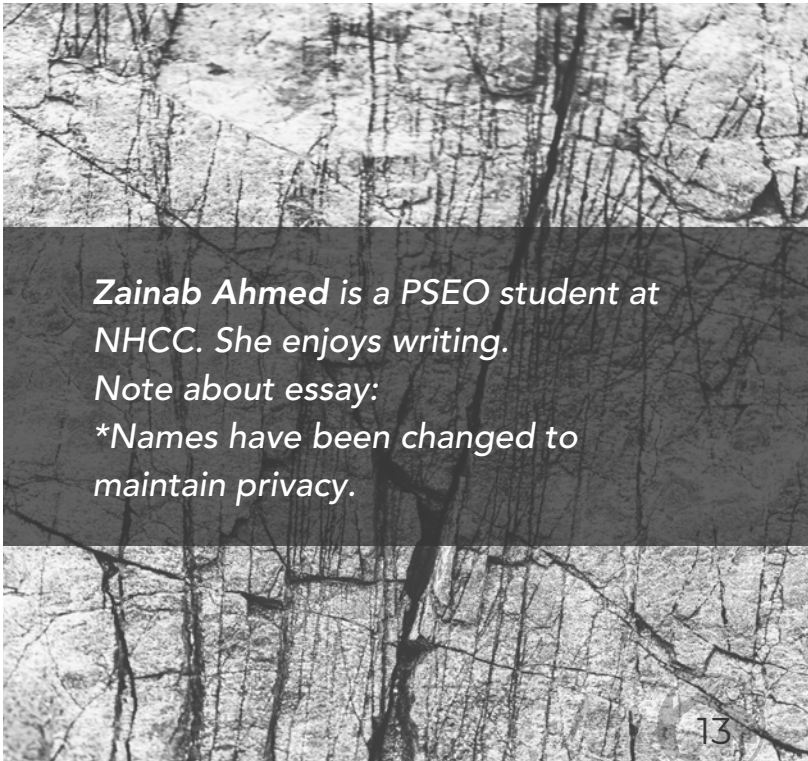
Once again, I wake up and go straight to her Twitter page. There is nothing new. Her last post fills the screen, and I can feel the panic and fear flooding through the screen, drenching me in sadness. Her parents had to have done something. No one tweets like that before they take their own life. I look again at Maya's own version of an obituary for Priya, and Maya says "[Priya's] parents had to have done something." Did she say that out of grieving anger or was it the truth? I don't even want to know if it was Priya's parents who did something or not. The

autopsy said it was a suicide. It took me this long to even look in the direction of accepting that Priya is gone. I can't handle knowing if it was something else. I had to tell three of our friends she had passed. I still can perfectly see their faces when I broke the news. In a way, their responses were not different at all. Their voices broke when they asked me "what do you mean she died?". Jade\* allowed herself more emotion. I could almost hear her heart dropping to the floor.

We all avoid Priya's name like the plague. On one side, it'll bring up old memories and grief and on the other, we are still knee deep in misery.

I want to keep Priya's memory alive by fighting for my beliefs and passing her legacy on to my future children, yet I want to lie down in my bed and not get out. I think, "maybe if I don't tell anyone about this, it'll go away".

Today, I don't know where I am in the timeline of grief. I know it's not linear. There are some days where I think I can accept the fact that she's not here and suffering anymore. As I type this, I just want to hug her one last time.



*Zainab Ahmed is a PSEO student at NHCC. She enjoys writing.*

*Note about essay:*

*\*Names have been changed to maintain privacy.*





## Ignorance Can Cause Misconceptions

By Boryonnoh Kambo

I've lived in America all my life; I had never ventured out of the country. I had never visited any country before, including Liberia, where my family is from. To be honest I wasn't interested in going anyways; with all the things I've heard, no way.

I was raised in a middle-class African home. When I was younger my parents used to tell me stories about Liberia (their home country), about all the good times they used to have. Like the story my mom told me about her school days: "Oh we used to have so much fun, we would play joke and mess and around in class," she would say; but it would have me wondering if the stories she told me sounded normal? Like it's a story you can commonly hear from anyone in America.

Whenever they mentioned anything about Africa in school, it was always the same ol' cliché setting. Of a typical scorching hot Savanna, full of wild animals roaming about the place. The people half dressed in clothes or not clothed at all. And a beautiful mix of a red and yellow sunset in the back to tie it all together. We were watching a short documentary about one of the countries in Africa.

My desk mate turned to me and asked, "You're African, right. How is Africa like?"

I didn't know what to say, even though I've heard stories and seen many images of Africa. I didn't know what it was like; I never got to see it for myself. So, I made up something. "Oh, it's exactly like this video, Africa looks just like that." But I didn't know that.

A couple of weeks passed, class had just ended, and it was dismissal time. We would pack like sardines at the door all impatiently waiting for the go ahead to leave. In all that frenzy a conversation arose. They were going on about names, saying things like my name means this, or my grandfather named me

that, and I don't know why I felt the urge to tell them about my name. In school or just any public place period, I never used the right pronunciation for my name, because it's much harder than what I tell people. I joined in the mix and yelled "You know the way you same my name isn't how you actually pronounce it." They all looked at me in silence.

Then one of them asked, "How do you pronounce it then?"

"Well, it's pronounced Boryonnoh." They all looked in confusion.

She asked again. "Can you repeat that, but slower?"

"It's pronounced Bo-ye-nah. The R is silent." They were quiet for a bit, then one of the guys snickered. Trying to hold back his laugh, he tried pronouncing my name in a very mocking way. Some other people joined in. I felt so embarrassed I never thought they would make fun of my name. At the same time, what did I expect, they were elementary schoolers? If something sounds funny to them of course they would laugh. As soon as the teacher told us we could leave, I bolted out the door and went straight on the school bus and plopped onto my seat. My friend asked me what was wrong, but I didn't answer, I wasn't in the mood for talking. When I got home, my sister could tell there was something wrong, so she asked me, "What's wrong, why you look so down?" At first, I refused to say anything, but as she kept pestering me, I gave in. I told her about the incident at school. She sat me down and said, "Did I ever tell you about the time we first moved to this country?" I stared at her wondering what that had to do with anything I just said. She went on though, "When we first moved here, me and your older siblings got bullied a lot in school. They'd pick at us telling us things like 'go back to Africa' or,

'you're dirty' and this and that. At times when we were walking down the hall; they would say this word Jambo."

"Jambo? What is that?" I asked curiously. "It's a greeting in Swahili," she said, but my sister was from Liberia. The main language spoken over there is English. She didn't know Swahili.

Fast forward to last year. My family decided to take a trip to Liberia, back in September. It would be my first time traveling there. Although I was not excited to go there, all the news you hear in America about Africa kind of discouraged me from wanting to go. I asked my mom if I could stay behind, and she gave me the option of staying with my aunt that lived in the next city. That was an awful idea because her home was dreadfully dull, and it was too far. I wouldn't even be able to hang with my friends. Left with no choice, I went along with them.

When we finally landed in Liberia, I was so excited, but it was mostly because I could get off the plane. I realized that traveling by plane was not for me. We went through the long

process of airport security and chasing after our baggage. After that we made our way outside and met with our ride. It was a big white jeep in good condition too. I got inside and it turned out that our destination was pretty far, two hours to be exact. Due to jet lag I was dead tired. I got no sleep on the plane. I fell into a deep sleep and missed out on most of the sightseeing from the car window.

The things I did get to see were fascinating. I did not catch long weeds poking out from everywhere or wild animals wandering around the place. What I did see was a flourishing city bustling with people. Some people were on the side of the roads making a living by selling multi-colored beaded slippers, African attire that were full of so many unique patterns, and snacks; it was an amalgamation of Western and Liberian goods. I was shocked, then I realized I was no better than those people who bullied my siblings. I based all the images that were shown to me back in America about Africa and already had an image of what it would be like, but it was nothing like what I had imagined. I'm very glad I got to see Liberia for myself instead of establishing it off stereotypical views.

*Boryonnoh Kambo, as you can probably tell by their name, is African. Although they were born and raised in America, it's a family that are actually from Africa—Liberia to be exact. But Boryonnoh was blessed enough to take a trip there last summer; it was their first time being out of the country and they went with their whole family. Since Liberia's main language is English, Boryonnoh doesn't speak any other language fluently, but they do know a little bit of sign language. 2021-2020 was their first year at NHCC, attending as a PSEO student. Besides that, a couple of things they enjoy are reading, preferring manga and webtoons. Boryonnoh is also a big fan of K-pop, and loves groups like Stray Kids, BLACKPINK, MAMAMOO, and many more.*





## My Journey: American Idol

By Breshaunda Hartwell

**S**eptember 21, 2019 was a monumental day for me. I woke up that day being filled with so much anxiety, stress, and happiness at once it was a horribly splendid feeling, like the feeling you have right before the drop on a rollercoaster. That was the day, I realized that I was finally going to achieve a goal I had been wanting to do since I was a little girl. I was finally going to audition for American Idol. Yes, American freaking Idol!! The best way I can explain how I was feeling was it felt like an out of body experience; it was like I my soul left my body, and I was just watching myself on auto pilot; but honestly none of it felt real.

Now let us rewind. When I finally got to the stadium in downtown Chicago, reality really started to set in. I can remember it like it was yesterday. We parked in this dingy parking lot next to a coffee shop. I was finally able to physically experience why they call it the "Windy City"; I could feel the gust of wind hitting my body with such force I thought I would tumble over. I can still feel the sun rays beaming down on my skin as I continued to walk up to the stadium doors. I could not help but want to turn around and just say forget it and not go through with it, but we had come so far already there was no way I could turn back. I was filled with fear of showcasing my talent, especially in front of a stadium full of people. Quite literally it was terrifying, and nerve racking. I honestly wanted it to just be over before it even began.

The worst part was waiting to be called, as I sat there full of suspense and watched all these extremely talented people get turned away. I started hearing a voice in my head telling me to get up and walk away. Trying to silence this voice in my head I decided to find a space where I could practice before being called. As I was practicing a security guard must have noticed that I was extremely nervous and was able to give me a little insight to the process. She walked up to me and said, "Honey let me tell you this,

it's a 50/50 chance, and the worst thing they can say is no. What you need to realize is that you are brave enough to come and put yourself out there, just don't forget to embrace this journey." After those great words of endearment, I started to feel better and was ready to just do it.

As I walked from the back balcony to the seating area where everyone was getting ready to audition. Those powerful words that the security guard had said to me instantly went out the window. Quickly realizing that my stage fright could overpower anything anyone had to say to me. But that was the reason, why I was auditioning in the first place. I went there to be able to say I did it and if I can do this, one of my biggest fears of singing in front of people then that was a step in the right direction.

As I was telling myself this, BOOM!!, my number was called. It was my time to go and the amount of sweat coming out of my body could fill at least 3 buckets. I felt like I was about to pass out, it was like I was Neo in the matrix. The scene when everything is moving at normal speed around him, and he is seeing everything slowed down to dodge the bullets. That is what it felt like. I had decided to sing "Titanium" by Sia. Now when you audition, how it is setup is you go in front of a vocal coach first in a group of four. Out of that group of four I was the last one to go, and that applied even more pressure.

After all the suspense, finally my time to sing, and I start off shaky due to my nerves. Once I finally got through the first part of my song my nerves started to settle and all the worries that I initially had went away. In that moment of me finishing up my song I felt invigorated, and like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Unfortunately, I did not make it to the next round, but that was okay with me, I was just happy I saw it through. The amount of pressure that I felt throughout that whole process I honestly do not ever want to feel again, it was a

*Breshaunda Hartwell was born here in Minneapolis, Minnesota and raised in between Minnesota and Mississippi for a while. Breshaunda's parents are from the south which is why they traveled back and forth between the north and south. She first enrolled in summer classes of 2021 and cannot wait to reach the goals of graduating from North Hennepin, majoring in political science, and then going on to finish law school. However, she has many talents and some things that interest her when not learning or doing homework. She likes to write music; it is her happy place and a constructive way to express herself freely. She loves all types of music, and her mom used to say she has a universal ear when it comes to music. Writing is something that comes natural to her, but she loves that she can keep upgrading her skills.*

check off my bucket list but to do a competition like that again I would have to pass.

All in all, the key to life is to just do it, if you have a dream that you want to follow or goal that you want to achieve. I say go for it 110%. Nothing feels better than knowing that you tried. My main reasoning for auditioning was to get out of my comfort zone and do something that I know would push my limits. Going through all those phases of emotions like anxiousness, fear, worry, courage, and empowerment was well worth it. It gave me insight on how I would like to move going forward and if singing was something I would like to keep pursuing. I had to put myself in a vulnerable situation that would either make me or break me, so I did not continue to waste any more time trying to pursue something I was not cut out for.

I am more than happy to say that it did not break me; that gut wrenching experience helped me in many ways than one. After the audition I wanted to prove to myself that I could sing in front of crowds without stage fright taking complete control of me. So, when I got back to Minnesota, I signed up for every open mic night I could find. I dedicated all my free time to writing and recording my own music. I even went on to writing music for other artists; I immersed myself into learning music terminology and the producing side to music. I was so eager to want to learn more and get better at my craft. That experience also helped me with things unrelated to music. It helped me learn how to handle rejection in public and how not to beat

myself up behind closed doors. I would not change one thing about going to Chicago to audition for American Idol. That was my journey that I needed to go on, I learnt so much about myself it in those three days that it made me feel so empowered. Even looking back on it and recalling that event, I feel strong and proud of myself today. Throughout my years of life, I have never really had anyone to cheer me on or genuinely root for me. I have always had to be my biggest supporter and that gets hard and is exhausting. So doing this like I said was a big achievement for me. It was something I had to be extremely vulnerable for then ask a stranger to judge me on a one-minute snippet of my vocal abilities, talk about stressful.

What I have learned is that life is what you make it, and it is never too late to push yourself and follow your dreams. I am happy I did not just take the easy route and give up. I would not have learnt how to control my nerves and that music is something that I am good at and that I truly want to pursue. Also, the little details matter to, even though I did not win that battle. Life is preparing me for the war ahead, this experience made me figuratively "Pull myself up by my bootstraps" and become focused on my future. But, not so focused that you miss the journey because that is where the lessons are. I am still living and learning and surprise myself everyday with what I accomplish. Just remember to practice saying yes in life and telling myself that "I can" and "will do it." If you start practicing, those two sayings it can change your life in an unimaginable way.





## My Client and Me!

*By Jomarie Williams*

I work for people with a disability where most of them are wheelchair-bound and suffer from seizures simultaneously. They make random loud noises at times. When they are excited or when they are terrified of something or in pain. We are required to take them out in the community to get some alone time as a means of recreational activities. On Monday, I took my client on a walk in the Golden Valley area because the weather was lovely and beautiful outside. Many others took advantage of the temperature and went out for a walk with their family, dogs, friends, and some of our clients.

As we walked past many people and their dogs, my client started to get worked out or excited. I think he was excited because of the dogs. He began to scream and make loud noises as we walked down the trail. He was rocking back and forth in his chair tell people started to gaze at us weirdly. Some steered and got farther away from us. At the same time, others showed a certain kind of look. The dogs barked as my client and I stood there in awe.

I did not know what to make of the different looks because they were all silently looking. Being a black person with a white man in a wheelchair in America, fear started to kick in. The fear of what would happen next, the fear of who would misinterpret the situation and call the cops all came running down my head. I had the following kind of fear for my client—fear because he was in a wheelchair. Were they looking at him or me for screaming? Whichever way, I was afraid for myself and my client. Today in America, the issue of race has been a significant problem.

In “Birding While Black,” author Drew Lanham discusses how it is easy for a black person to be a white person’s stereotype profile in America. The fear and terror black people live in daily don’t matter your socioeconomic status. How well you carry yourself has made it difficult for a black person to not think about what will happen in public. We can both be in the same space. Still, they have a different perspective on the situation we encounter daily because of our skin color.

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In America, the issue of race has made it difficult for people to look beyond the obvious. For the past few months, America has been in disarray by the issue of police brutality and racial profiling. Many from both sides (White and Black) are coming together to seek justice for people of color today in America, as Lanham wrote in his essay: “As we gaze together, everything that’s different about us disappears into the plumages of the creatures we see beyond our binoculars. There is power in the shared pursuit of feathered thing.”

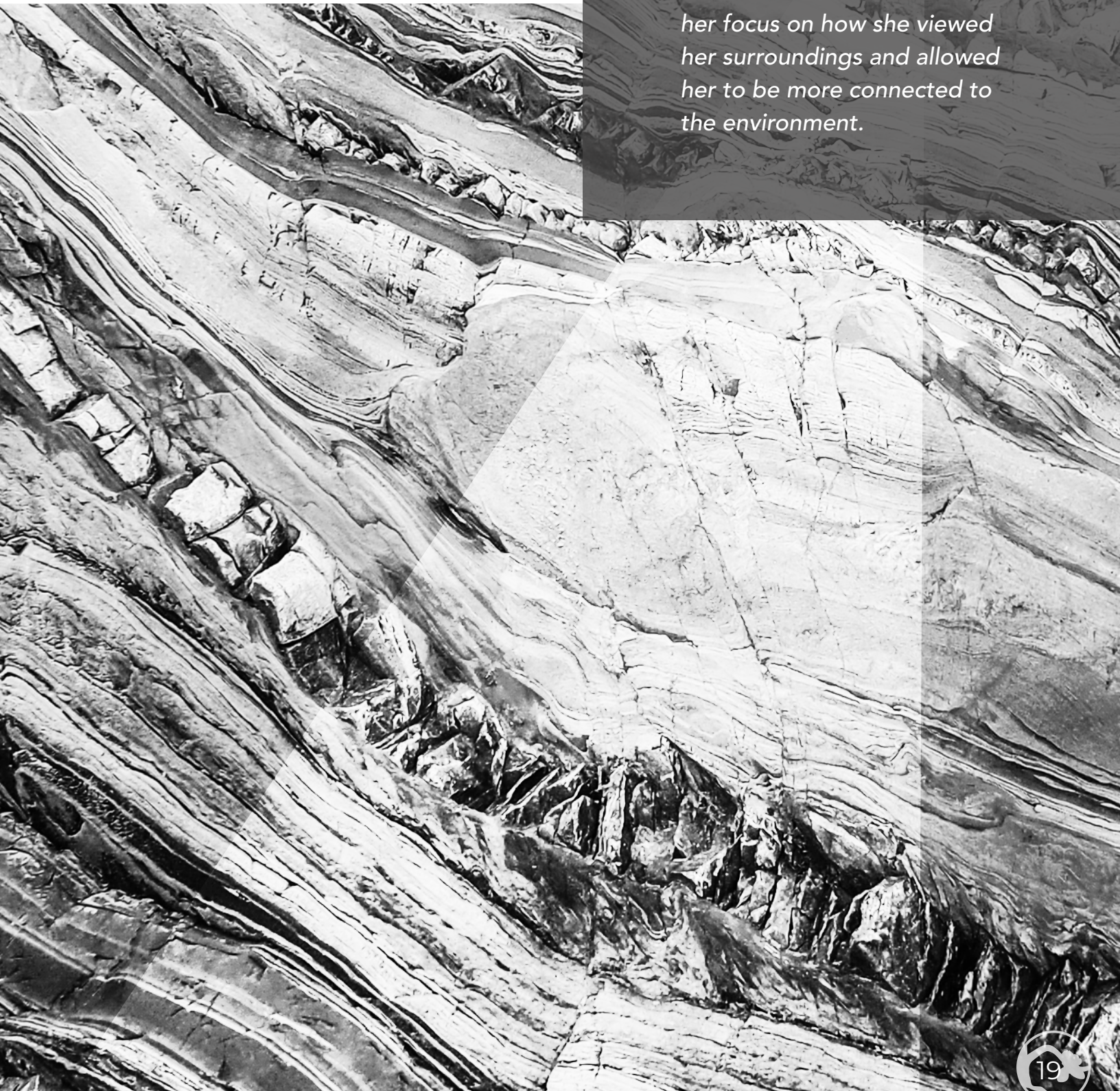
To me, this is us looking past race and working together for a better America.

As Evelyn White wrote in her story “Black Woman and the Wilderness,” about the sheer fears black people experienced in America. These fears make our movement limited to people. She also talked about the 1963 bombing of the church in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed more than a dozen people by racists. The bombing lead to the Civil Rights Movement in America. Today, we can see the same thing happening in America again. As I was reading this story, I felt like Evelyn. The constant fear I live in every day being a black person in America, with a black son and husband, kills me inside. My son is



in daycare, which makes me worry every day he goes to daycare. A lot of hate is being spilled around our community by some of our leaders and the police we are supposed to be for help. All these have left African Americans vulnerable and living in constant fear for our lives. We are always looking over our heads and still thinking, who is next?

*Jomarie Williams is currently a student here at NHCC studying Human Services. Jomarie loves writing and has developed the passion for Nature since she took the class Nature in Literature. The class has shifted her focus on how she viewed her surroundings and allowed her to be more connected to the environment.*







## Prayers to the Sky

By Yashodhara Jayawardena

**M**y friends' animated voices drifted around me as each of them recounted the exciting events that had occurred during their Thanksgiving weekend. They detailed feasts with their extended family, a huge party with friends and neighbors, a stay at the family cabin. My family celebrated Thanksgiving, but not in the way everyone else was able to. When it came my turn to speak, I timidly described how my family of six sat down for a meal consisting of my mom's Sri Lankan quinoa recipe, roast turkey, and my father's rhubarb pie. It seemed so stupid compared to the fun get-togethers all my friends had with their families. As I grew older, my mindset eventually became more appreciative of the moments my family and I shared together, regardless of whether or not they were similar to everyone else's. Although my culture was not as perceptible in the lives of most Americans around me, I discovered beauty and identity in upholding my personal cultural and religious values.

I was six years old when I first became aware of what made me different from the majority of kids in the first grade. The strong aroma of my biryani, boiled vegetables and fish ambul thiyal wafted into the air as I opened my lunchbox in the school cafeteria.

"Gross, do you guys smell that? I'm gonna vomit!"

This remark came from the surly voice of the boy sitting next to me with his lunch tray, which held a sloppy joe, a carton of milk, carrot sticks, and applesauce. He brusquely picked up his tray and moved to a seat further down the table. Embarrassed, I zipped up my lunchbox and fled the table assigned to my class, opting for a seat at the empty parent table, where parents would occasionally visit and sit to have lunch with their child. While blinking away

the tears that had begun to pool in my eyes, I picked at my rice, vegetables and curry with a spoon, my appetite for the dish my mother had so diligently put together no longer present. Often afterwards, I would empty my homemade lunch into the big garbage bin in the middle of the cafeteria. Instead, I got in line for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or had whatever else was on the cafeteria's lunch menu that day.

Guilt consumed me whenever I watched my Amma, my mom, cook me lunch every morning, knowing it would all be thrown away only a few hours later. If only she knew what I have to endure at school, I thought. I could not share my burden with my mother because I did not want her to think I was unappreciative

I was six years old when I first became aware of what made me different from the majority of kids in the first grade.

or repelled by her food. Still, the strange glances, scrunched noses and uncomfortable postures of my classmates nagged me every time I sat down to unpack my lunch. At least I was not weird anymore... right?

Several years passed, and I had learned to ignore

the hurtful judgments of my peers—at least that is what I made myself believe. In the sixth grade, my Honors orchestra group went on a day-long field trip to perform for various elementary schools and nursing homes. We had stopped at a McDonald's for a lunch break, and I was sitting with my friend Sophia, who was busy recounting a conflict that had occurred that weekend between her aunt and the pastor at her church. She paused briefly after she had

finished with her story.

"You go to church, don't you, Yasho?" Sophia asked me.

I set down the fries in my hand, wiping off my salty fingers with a napkin. When did my palms get so sweaty?

"I... well... yes. Yeah, of course I do," I stammered.

"Really? What church do you go to?" she probed curiously.

My eyes darted around the restaurant uneasily as I tried to recall the name of one of the churches near my house. After about ten seconds, my mind still remained blank.

"Uh, I can't remember what it's called."

As if our orchestra director could sense the awkward conversation that was bound to follow about my unknowing of the name of "my church," Mr. Martin announced it was time to load into the buses to continue on our trip.

On the bumpy bus ride back to school, I leaned my head against the window and watched the sunny suburban landscape rush past my vision as my mind drifted back to the day's aforementioned events. Had I really lied about my religion? We had discussed religions outside of Christianity at school, and I was certainly not the only person of a different faith that my peers were acquainted with. So, what compelled me to want to hide the fact I went to a Buddhist temple, and not a church? The proposition that I might be ashamed of something so fundamental to my identity and that of my family loomed over me depressingly.

That summer—the summer of 2016—my younger brothers, my sister, my parents and I went on a month-long vacation to Sri Lanka, my parents' home country. I had been to Sri Lanka

multiple times when I was younger, but this is the only trip I could recall distinctly. Once we arrived, the six of us squeezed all our luggage into three taxis and set off from the capital city of Colombo to my father's hometown. As I took in the change of scenery, I was awestruck. The bustling towns crammed with people, bright lights adorning the front of every store, festive music blaring in the streets—it was something more extraordinary than Times Square at midnight.

We visited colossal, dome-shaped stupas, mounted the ancient rock Sigiriya, and prayed in majestic chaitya halls. One particular memory I vividly remember is a visit my family and I made

to a popular chaitya in the city of Kalutara one brisk evening. Dressed in all white, we arrived at the temple and removed our shoes, washing our hands and feet as this was a sacred place in Buddhism. Ritually, we burned oil lamps and placed them among the rows of thousands of other glittering lamps outside. Next, I gathered the flowers I would use as offerings before prayer, sprinkling them with water and getting ready to head inside the chaitya.

As my family and I ascended the stairs, I was entranced by the intricate designs carved into the golden interior of the stupa; designs that swirled and crept up pillars, painted faces of gods and goddesses across the ceilings and imprinted unreadable chronicles into the walls. At the top floor, the glorious archetypal statue of the Lord Buddha stood before me like a blazing red sun at twilight. An overwhelming feeling of serenity flooded my body as we chanted prayers and listened to the echo of the large bell reverberate throughout the dome. After we exited the chaitya and prepared to place our jasmine-scented incense sticks on the burners as offerings, my Amma crouched down next to me and pointed up at the clear, night sky.

"Some say that if the energy and prayers in a temple are powerful enough, a sign from the

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Buddha will appear up there," she spoke quietly in Sinhala. "You just have to devote yourself to your faith."

It was sometime around then that I experienced a moment of self-revelation. It dawned upon me that during this trip, I had not once felt the need to filter any aspect of myself, whether it be my beliefs, my clothing choices, or the food I ate. It felt liberating to find beauty and value in something I once repudiated. Gazing up at the empty expanse of night, I willed for a colorful light to flash among the dark skies like my mother said it would.

"Maybe next time," I whispered to myself.

In all honesty, my family not throwing a party for the annual Super Bowl game or the way my name never appears on word problems in math class never truly bothered me. It was a self-imposed comparison that did. The pride I carry for my ethnic background comes not from the approval of my friends or even society as a whole; rather, it flowers within me. Learning to accept myself, my culture and my religion for what they are shaped me to be the unique and confident individual I am today.



*Yashodhara Jayawardena is a high school student in the PSEO program at NHCC. Coming from a Sri Lankan background, Yashodhara experiences the struggles of growing up as the eldest child in a first-generation American family of six. Nonetheless, she hopes to continue her hard work to pursue a career as a psychiatrist while also enjoying her hobbies of writing, cross-country running, and skiing.*





## Hispanic-Latino Discrimination in America

By Correa Gianfranco

In this world we are constantly being categorized by our race and ethnicity, and for many people it is hard to look beyond that. Especially if you are not Caucasian you are going to attract attention from others when you enter to the United States. In this nation of freedom and equality, there are still many people who believe that their race is superior to others. For those who have travel internationally or even travel inside the United States you are familiar with this uncomfortable situation. For most non-U.S. citizens like me, this type of situation is common; it does not matter where you go, someone will always be looking at you and trying to figure out where you are from. Through my life I have encountered a few people that had made me feel uncomfortable about my ethnicity.

Back in 2017 I decided to travel to the United States to find a University that would be a good fit for me. Finally, I found NHCC that would be great and convenient because it was closer to my friend's house. On the second time I entered to United states through Atlanta, I was on the line waiting for my turn (I have to point out that my previous entries were through Atlanta as well). The Immigration official came to me and said this is the second time I saw you entering to my country in less than 6 months. What are your intentions? He started

to intimidate me (at least that was what he thought he was doing), and after this he said you have to come with me. They took me to a small room next to the airport customs. Inside that room his colleagues started to search my stuff: backpack, luggage, even my cellphone. I thought this must be illegal. I have privacy, but I knew this was their job, so I calmed down. All the time I knew I was coming to study and I had all my documents, Visa, etc. They also asked me how you have all this designer clothing, even asked me what do my parents do for a living. Finally, they called my friend after 3 hours and confirmed that I was going to stay there with her. After that long wait, they let me go, I lost my flight, I was hungry, and everything was so uncomfortable. I felt discriminated because most people in USA think all Hispanics are coming here illegally, have no education, or that are all poor that need to work.

To summarize, I believe we should not categorize one person by their ethnicity. Because like here in the USA and everywhere else in the world there's people that have a good education, are successful, and have good values. Finally, I would like to say it does not matter where you come from, what color you are, or if you have money or not; we are all equal, we are all humans.

*No biography provided.*







## A Love and Hate Relationship with My Identity

By Mercedes Lor

As my grandma pulled me in not letting me escape, she kindly smiled and said, “Koj yog Hmoob, ua cas koj tsis paub hais lub Hmoob?” I froze as I did not understand the straight gibberish from my traditional Hmong grandma. I looked towards my aunties and uncles pleading to them telepathically to help me escape from the embarrassment of not knowing my native language. My grandma who was still so happy to see me held me closer and hoped I would answer her. Finally, my auntie translated, “Grandma said, you are Hmong, so how come you don’t know how to speak Hmong?” Still not knowing how to reply to my grandma, I nervously said, “I don’t know” and ran away, ashamed, and went to find my cousins. Throughout my childhood, I have repeatedly heard the same words, but I never understood the full meanings of the gibberish coming out of my grandparents’ mouths.

I was extremely white-washed and well-adjusted to the modern American lifestyle. For all my childhood, I had lived in a highly suburban white neighborhood in Ramsey, Minnesota. The area was predominantly full of white middle-class residents with very few families of color. Both my parents were always busy working, which gave very few opportunities for them to teach Hmong to my siblings and me. Therefore, I had very little knowledge of my ethnic background and language.

Eventually, I grew to dislike my race, as I wished to be white like my friends to fit in more. It seemed as if my white friends had the most ideal life and received everything they wished upon. I would always listen to

my friends as they described their prosperous vacations or entertaining weekends. I believed the fair platinum blonde hair my white friends had was prettier than my dull and boring black hair. I was ashamed when my family would host the religious ceremonies at our home. I was embarrassed by the blaring jingling bells that clashed together as the Hmong shaman vigorously shook just outside our front door. The loud chanting of random gibberish always made me cringe, as I feared my friends would judge me and assume my family was weird. Fortunately, this only lasted until I was fourteen, we then moved to a more diverse area in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

Being surrounded by a community of my own was a feeling of a misplaced puzzle piece finally finding its original place.

Moving to Brooklyn Park made a significant transformation to my life and me as an individual. From my freshman year of high school and on forward, I was given more opportunities to learn about my culture. My high school, Park Center Senior High, offered a Hmong class for native speakers to learn how to improve our Hmong and explore the culture and traditions. Although I still have a long way to improve my skills, I am glad to say that I can speak, read, and write in Hmong.

I have learned that not only I grew up whitewashed and have lost my cultural identity, but it was common among Hmong American children. The reason why many Hmong children grow up not knowing Hmong is because the Hmong culture is slowly disappearing as Hmong Americans are adjusting to the American modern lifestyle. Soon enough, I accepted myself as a Hmong American and found others with similar struggles from growing up in a Hmong household. Immediately, I made many

Eventually, I grew to dislike my race, as I wished to be white like my friends to fit in more.

Hmong friends and started to attend all the Hmong events and celebrations.

Over three years, I have a stronger understanding of my Hmong culture, but it had soon unraveled the flaws hidden between the cracks within my community. Throughout Hmong history, it has been generalized that men are superior to women. In most cases, this leaves women to be silenced and continue to be a good wife and daughter in law. The gender roles within the Hmong community have caused stress, depression, marriage issues, and toxic homes to many individuals. The Hmong community holds high expectations of how we should be and what we are expected to do. Not only does it affect women, but as well as elders, wives and husbands, teenagers, and even our new generation. Additionally, the older Hmong generation does not like to acknowledge mental health within the Hmong community.

They have a belief that depression is not real and is just a phase; to be diagnosed with mental health is to be a disappointment. Where not only one is looked down on, but as well as the individual's whole family. As a result of this, this prevents many to reach out and receive the help they need.

To make matters worse, there are rarely any "I love you's" or hugs and kisses. There were rarely any times I would hear an "are you okay?" after a clumsy accident. Instead, I'll find


myself facing an endless stream of lectures from my parents: "Who told you not to be careful? This is all your fault. How can you be so foolish?" However, underneath these verbal punches are their "I love you's" and "I'm glad you're okay" Many Hmong parents were never shown affection from their parents growing up which passed onto the next generation. Our parents show tough love through harsh actions with good intentions hidden under. Even after the constant yelling, I could never find the heart to be upset because deep down I know that if my family did not care about me then they would have not said a word.

Despite the imperfections that make up my culture, I have also grown to love the great moments shared within my community. Hmong people exceedingly value family and love. It is heartwarming to know that a random relative I barely know at a family function is willing to treat me as their own as if it had not been years since my last encounter with them. It is the traits of generosity and respect that have always been embedded in our blood that perfect our imperfect Hmong community. We support one another as a whole community and make sure everyone is protected. It is not just a community, but a big family with open arms for all.

I fell in love with the traditions that have been passed down for years that everyone







anxiously waits for as time inches closer towards the day. Whether it is Hmong New Year, the July 4th Hmong tournaments, or the Hmong family reunion picnics. It is not just about going to sip some golden milk boba tea and hang out with friends, but it is about having an enjoyable time as everyone expresses the culture and traditions. These enormous gatherings bring everyone together as some may find new encounters or reuniting with old bonds.


One of my all-time favorite things about the Hmong culture is the Hmong traditional clothing. Hmong clothes are hand-made by Hmong professionals that are highly skilled in making special Hmong cross-stitch embroidery. Our Hmong clothes are made with a combination of colorful synthetic cloth, soft cotton cloth, and rough stiff hemp cloth. There are many variations of styles depending on the producer's preference, but almost all Hmong clothes have the same concept. A Hmong outfit consists of a vest sewn in colorful patterns, a ruffled skirt or silky black plain pants, a hat of the size of a basketball, a stiff money belt consisting of silver coins attached to beads, a colorful sash, and a detailed metal Hmong necklace. I adore the fact that Hmong clothes are highly unique compared to American clothing.

Hmong foods are a significant factor that bring Hmong people together. It is something we get excited for that turns us into kids receiving sweets. The most common foods Hmong people eat are pho, kapoon, khao piak, Hmong sausage with sticky rice, grilled pork, papaya, eggrolls, spring rolls, boba tea, and tri color drinks. My personal favorite dish is homemade pho. Pho consists of a rich beef flavorful broth with narrow rice noodles and any preferred condiments. Its scent is so strong it captivates and pulls everyone's attention towards the dining table before my mom can yell, "come eat!" Where it is so fulfilling it will put me in a food coma for the rest of the day then come

back for more the next day. It is a never-ending addiction that I feel no shame in. Even though pho does not originate from the Hmong culture, we always highly praise it as the best food in the Hmong community.

In the end, I have come to learn that I should love and be proud of being a Hmong American, as it is where I came from and has made me who I am today. Even with all the bad traits within the Hmong community, I am thankful to experience the blessed moments being Hmong comes with. As I reflect on my childhood, I realize things have changed so much since then. I am no longer the small and petite girl who hated her race, nor am I still ashamed of my religious shaman ceremonies.

Instead, I understand the significance of performing our religious ceremonies and I have grown to love my beautiful, long, and black hair. Most importantly, I am proud that I can finally understand and able have a conversation with my grandparents without them having to struggle with an English sentence. As a first-generation Hmong American child, it is unfortunate to see my culture and language slowly disappearing. Knowing that if I had not explored more of my ethnic background and language, then my future children would not have the opportunity to learn which continues the cycle of our people losing the Hmong culture and language. I am hopeful to see the Hmong culture and language restore and grow, as well as fix the flaws within us.



*Mercedes Lor was born in Minnesota, and both of her parents are from Laos. She has traveled to Wisconsin, Illinois, North Carolina, Florida, and California. Mercedes speaks English and knows a limited amount of Hmong. She is currently a part-time PSEO student, and 2021-2020 was her first year at North Hennepin Community College. She loves music and spending time with loved ones! She also enjoys playing tennis, and her favorite boba flavor is coconut.*





## Unscathed

*By Catherine Cotter*

One would think a day in Assisi, Italy would be perfect. I learned very quickly this is not the case. My traveling companion, Maria, and I had a day to hike around Assisi, before heading back into the heart of Rome. The sun was shining through the thin layer of clouds. Our shoes scraped against the grey cobblestone streets as we made our trek up what I would call, "The Hill" of Assisi. We had the beginnings of a normal tourist's day by going into different churches and shops along the road, and eating lunch in a small cafe, until we decided to go into the Basilica di Santa Chiara.

Unfortunately, the doors were locked. With nowhere to be, Maria and I decided to make our way down the other side of "The Hill." As we approached an archway, both of us noticed a middle-aged Italian man. He was lounging with his back against the wall connected to an archway on a wooden, three-legged stool. He was watching us approach.

The Basilica was a few hundred feet behind us. We had tried the doors both on the front and the side of it to get in. The gentleman would have been able to see us trying the side door from where he was sitting near the arch. To our right was a wide, steep street, which plateaued a little way down. This road headed downward towards the backs of houses and the stone buildings. There were signs that said something about a museum on the corner of the street we were on and the one going downward. The man at the archway stood up from his little stool and started speaking Italian. Maria asked if he spoke English. He nodded yes.

In broken English, he asked if we were trying to go into the Basilica. After we responded that we were, he told us it did not open until three. He informed us of a museum that we could go walk through until it opened. Using gestures, he instructed us to go down the steep road and follow the signs to the museum.

As we journeyed the short distance down the road, we noticed the man following us. Everything about this felt off as an uneasy feeling began creeping into my gut. I looked over at Maria. She noticed too. When we reached the plateau of the street, the man from the gate stopped and beckoned us towards one of the buildings. This one was similar to the rest around it; tall and made of varying darkness of sand-colored stones. The only difference was the large, old, wooden double doors opening up into what seemed to be a dimly lit room of old junk.

The man was very insistent that we go in and look around the "museum." Walking through the doors, Maria and I were hit with the smell of dust, old wood, and mildew. There were two rooms inside: a large room that we walked into when we first entered, and a smaller room that you had to walk up a wooden ramp to get to. The walls of the larger room were lined with an assortment of swords, axes, suits of weathered armor, flags and random pieces of farm equipment. Both of us glanced at each other and knew we had to walk through this as quickly as possible and get out.

We started in the smaller room. This room was set up to represent what would be in a home hundreds of years ago. At the center was a medieval looking dining room table. Each corner was dedicated to a different function the home would have. One was weaving with an old-fashioned weaving loom and spindle for making thread or yarn. Next was one for wash, with large metal tubs and cauldrons with long wooden poles to stir the wash. The remaining corners of the room housed glass dishes, pots and pans, and cooking utensils.

The man from the gate followed us and with each section continued to encourage us to take pictures of the items within the room. We humored him and took pictures of the items

but did not allow him to take pictures of us with them. From previous experiences we knew if we had someone take a picture for us it usually cost us ten euros. So, we moved back into the larger room to finish glancing over stuff.

The first room we had entered when we came through the door had a few alcoves that held more items that one would find in a home. A baby cradle and vintage children's toys that would either give you splinters or tetanus rested in one. Others had more tools, an assortment of clay pots, or some green leafy plants. This room had a few long wooden work tables that had a hodgepodge of different icons and religious tapestries, hand-held carving tools, mortars and pestles, and knick-knacks, all of which had seen better days.

None of this would have bothered me except for the uneasy feeling in my stomach that would not diminish. Something was telling me over and over I needed to leave. I felt gross and dirty. But most of all I felt something evil was there. I could never really explain the feeling I had while there. All I knew was I just wanted to get out and put as much space as possible between that place and Maria and me. This feeling reached its height when we got to the far side of the large room. The items lining those walls made my skin crawl and my heart pound. All I could think was we are going to

get killed.

The first of the last three walls held torture equipment. The Italian man especially pushed for us to take pictures of the sexual torture devices and castration equipment. He said all the Americans wanted pictures with those. Following that was the wall of maces, broadswords, and beheading axes. The last wall had a litter or sedan chair against it. Here the Italian was very adamant that we get into the rickety, claustrophobia inducing box that was supposedly created to carry the more well-off people who lived when it would have been in use. It screamed "terrible idea!" at Maria and me. Not only that, but there was a sign in Italian that said equivalently that pictures in this contraption were fifteen euros. We politely refused numerous times. We were finally able to leave. Or so we thought.

This Italian man stopped us and told us we needed to pay fifteen euros each for going through the museum. Not only had this man pressured us into entering the museum, but also had the audacity to charge us for the experience of thinking we were going to be killed. Even though nothing bad happened to us, besides losing thirty euros between the two of us, I listen to my gut instincts more intently, because if there was ever a next time I might not be so fortunate to make it out unscathed.

*"Unscathed" is a personal story about an experience Catherine Cotter had while traveling outside of the United States for the first time. Before that adventure to Italy and after returning home, she lived a simple but dedicated life. She has five siblings, all older than her except one. She and her sisters grew up as sisters often do: with love and conflict, and always on Team Girl (as opposed to Team Boy, which consisted of her brother). Their education was unique in that her mother decided to homeschool them. Her decision to do that while being a stay-at-home mother shaped who they are as a family and gave us a huge appreciation for the hard work that is "mother." Catherine's cousins were also a big part of her life, and they have had many adventures together including several hiking trips outside of our home state of Minnesota. The people in her life are very important to her, which makes her very aware of the lives around her. Today she can be found working toward a degree in nursing with the goal of caring for others.*





## Mass Genocide in Ethiopia

*By Munira Mohammed*

Ethiopia has many different groups of people and tribes. For many years in history, the Oromo people have faced many problems with the government. Although they are the largest tribe in the country, they have been taken over and colonized by the Amhara and Tigray tribe. They have lost their land, wealth, and lives during the centuries. Oromos are fighting for their freedom. Oromo people are having a lot of problems in Ethiopia.

One major problem of this mass genocide in Ethiopia is how the government is hurting innocent people. To begin with, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is sending his military to break into Oromo people's houses. They destroy people's home and rob Oromos for no reason. Second, women are being abuse and raped by soldiers. The women have no power to stop the soldier and no one can help them. Finally, the military kills innocent children in their own homes. The soldiers do not care how old they are and do what they want. In Ethiopia, Oromos have to support the military no matter what.

Another problem in Ethiopia is how the government controls protest against the government. First, they will be arrested by the police if they caught protesting. This is usually violent and people can not say what they want. Moreover, if they wounded by police, they will not be treated in the hospital. This causes many Oromos to die for minor injuries. Also, they can be killed by military for protesting. Many Oromos have been murdered by military and families cannot bury them until they get permission from the government.

In addition to the other problems, the government is controlling the media and internet. First of all, Oromos are not able to get news update when the internet is cut off. This is dangerous because Oromo people do


not know what is going on every day. Next, the prime minister is lying to the world. Since he can control what is on the news, no one knows how he is killing the Oromo people. Oromos outside of Ethiopia only know about the violence from calling their family. Furthermore, if anyone is caught posting about what is really happen online, they will go to jail.

The last problem is wrongful imprisonment. Firstly, innocent Oromo political leaders are being thrown in jail for leading Oromo people. These people suffer in prison. For example, prisoners are tortured every day. The military starves them to death or poison them instead.

Furthermore, the prisoners have no chance to get out of prison. The prime minister refused to talk about this topic and makes them suffer in jail. Finally, the military kills the prisoners secretly. They murder the prisoners at night and leave the body for animals to eat. Sometimes they throw the body in the river and no one hears from them again. When the family comes to ask about their loved ones, they are thrown in jail with no explanation.

In conclusion, the Oromo people have a long way to go before they will get their freedom. The prime minister refuses to leave his power and has become a dictator. If the mass genocide in Ethiopia does not stop, many people will continue to get hurt. Oromo people do not deserve this pain just to get freedom. Oromo people will not quit until they get what they want.





*Munira Mohammed was born in Ethiopia and lived there for most of her childhood. She was raised in an Oromo household and has the most respect for their culture. She can speak both Oromo and Amharic. She moved to the United States as a young adult and began to search for a better life for her family and herself. Education is very important to Munira, and this led her to decide to return to school to major in Medical Laboratory Technology. She is grateful to have this opportunity to work hard and improve her family's life. She enjoys learning about new things, exercising, and reading books in her spare time.*



# North Hennepin Community College's Studies in Writing and Literature

## **Associate of Fine Arts in Creative Writing**

The Associate of Fine Arts in Creative Writing prepares students for further university-level creative writing studies by combining liberal arts general education courses and foundation courses in various genres of writing and literary studies. Graduates will be able to write effectively in multiple genres of creative writing with the intent of beginning a career in a related field or transferring into a baccalaureate program at a four-year institution.

## **English Transfer Pathway Associate of Arts**

The English Transfer Pathway Associate of Arts offers students the opportunity to complete an AA degree with course credits that directly transfer to designated English bachelor's degree programs at Minnesota State universities. The curriculum has been specifically designed so that students completing this pathway degree and transferring to one of the seven Minnesota State universities enter with junior-year status. The courses in the Transfer Pathway associate degree will expose students to a broad knowledge of literary periods, genres, criticism and methods of interpretation, and writing, and all will directly transfer and apply to the designated bachelor's degree program in a related field.

## **Academic English Language Proficiency Certificate**

This certificate recognizes that a student in the EAP (English Language for Academic Purpose) program has demonstrated a high level of proficiency in academic English language and literacy skills to support student academic and career success. Students also gain skills for education and employment through the completion of elective courses which support continued development of written, verbal, and technology communication, advancement of international perspectives, and career exploration.

# Other Publication Opportunities at NHCC

## **Northern Light**

Northern Light is a student-run journal dedicated to the publication of original scholarship by NHCC students in order to disseminate knowledge and increase the visibility of undergraduate research at two-year colleges. It is published electronically on the web every spring.

For more: [www.nhcc.edu/studentpublications](http://www.nhcc.edu/studentpublications)



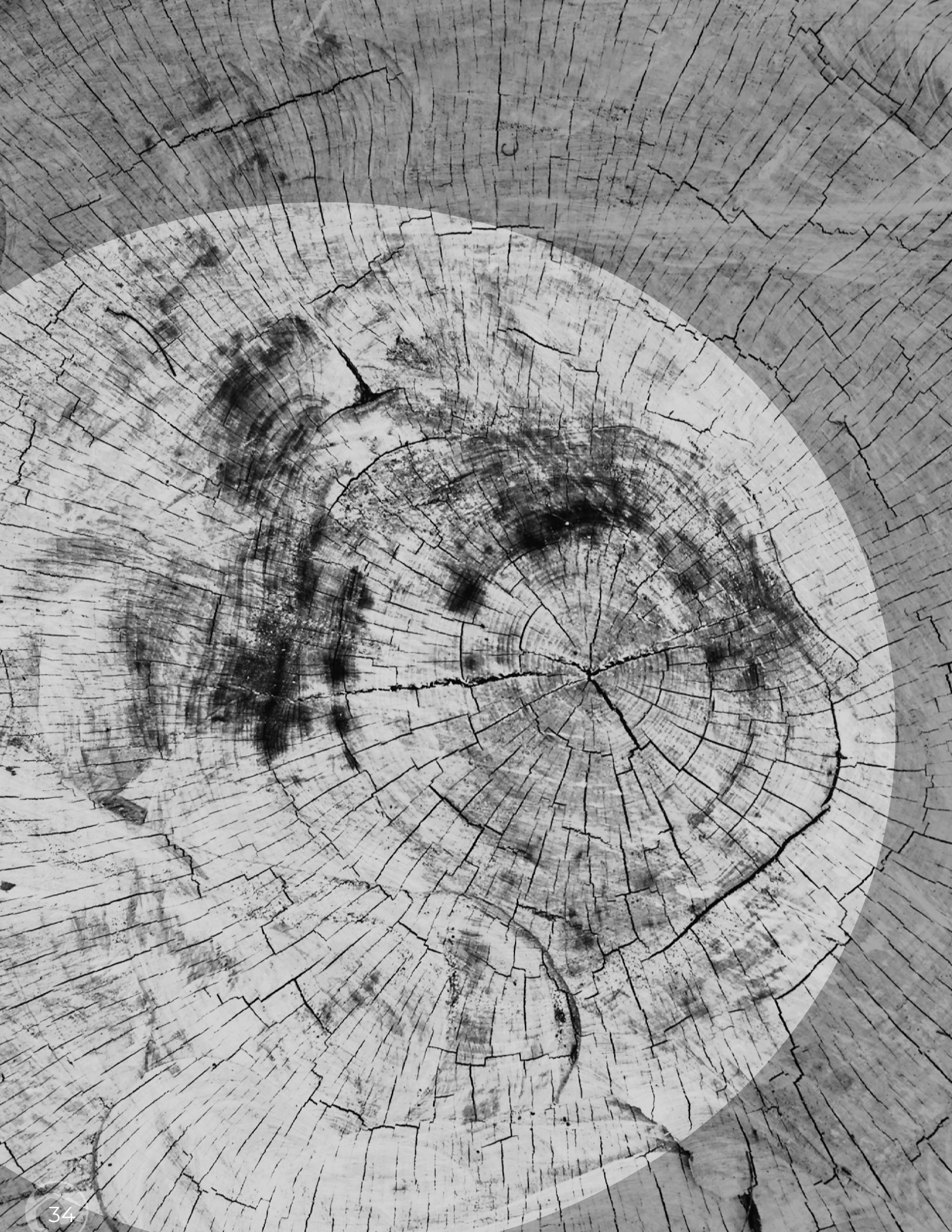
## **Under Construction**

Every year since 1968, students at North Hennepin Community College have collaborated to produce the award-winning literary and arts journal Under Construction. Its pages have typically portrayed a breadth of human experience, and that has grown due to the increasing diversity of the NHCC students.

For more: [www.nhcc.edu/studentpublications](http://www.nhcc.edu/studentpublications)









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