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Have you ever wondered, “*Who am I?*” That was a question I used to ask myself everyday as a kid. Growing up, I never felt like I fit in with all of the other girls. Everyone was always worried about their crushes and who they were “talking to” at the time, but I never felt that way. I always felt abnormal because my crush was never a guy; it was a girl and that made me feel different and scared. I didn't realize that liking girls was okay until I got introduced to the LGBTQ+ community. When I say introduced, I don't actually mean getting formally introduced to a specific person. I more in a sense began to meet people who were a part of this community that in a way opened my eyes to something that I had never known before. If I had told my younger self that I am gay, she would be like, “girl you're crazy,” but it brings me great joy to be able to look at myself in the mirror and know that my life is going to be okay. Becoming a part of this community has given me a sense of who I am, helping me see the world in a new light, realizing that being “different” is okay. It has truly shaped me into the person I am today and has helped me appreciate the beauty of community.

As I've grown up I've had to come to the hard truth that it's way easier to fit in than it is to be “different.” I used to despise the fact that I was in fact different from a lot of the kids that I grew up with, but I realized that it's actually a gift. The LGBTQ+ community opened up my eyes to a world that I was never too familiar with due to my background as a young kid. This community is filled with all kinds of people from different backgrounds that love me for who I am. It's not a small community; rather, it spreads all over the nation, which makes it so wonderful. No matter where I am I know that there's always going to be someone there to welcome me into a society that can be not so warm all the time.

In my eyes, being different and not conforming to something are two total opposites. For the longest time I tried to hide who I was to conform to a society that would accept me more that way. The LGBTQ+ community really opened my eyes to a world where I didn't have to do that. I

attended my first pride parade last year and it was one of the best experiences I have had. The kindness from everyone there was so overwhelming. I had never been in a space that truly loved me for who I was without me having to hide parts of myself. The environment was so vibrant, colorful, and happy that it truly brought so much joy to me. There were so many rainbows everywhere and it was awesome; even I had rainbows on my face and painted on my arms. One of my favorite things there was a group of men wearing bright rainbow capes. Seeing all of these people who went through some of the same struggles I did while coming to terms with my sexuality really gave me great comfort.

I would say that figuring out who you are and who you want to be as a person is one of the most challenging things anybody has to go through, not to mention when you realize, "Oh crap, I think I'm gay." I had made that realization at a very young age but I didn't come to terms with it until about two years ago. By speaking to people who were a part of this community, I learned that I wasn't alone and that I didn't have to be so scared. Many people I met over the years gave me so much confidence that I was finally able to come out. Confidence was a very hard thing for me to acquire, but this community is filled with so many people who have the confidence to just be themselves without fear and without apologizing for it. One of my friends that I met a long time ago really helped me with this. He came out at a young age, so I always had to see the hardships he went through while being a young, gay teen in a not so accepting world. The thing that I admire most about him was that he never stopped being who he was, no matter what happened to him, and that is something I try to live by everyday.

As you've read I hope you can see that society isn't as scary as it can seem. It's actually awesome to be a little different, and being gay is nothing to ever be ashamed of. It's hard to see sometimes how much love is in the world with all the negative things going on and all the commotion with our own lives, but finding this community of welcoming and loving people has helped me to see how beautiful people can be. I'd encourage anybody to try and find a

community where they can truly be themselves, whether it the LGBTQ+ community or any other community out there.