

Michaela
First Place Winner age 11-12

For me, I can't simply walk a mile in just one pair of shoes. I walk a mile in many types of shoes. I walk in sneakers, pointe shoes, soft leather boots, boots with silver spurs, clogs, Roman sandals, and I walk barefoot. What do these shoes all have in common? They represent my cultural background and who I am.

I was born in a place known for its tortoise-snake wine, Tuanhu lotus seeds, and its famed Yinzhen (Silver Needle) tea. This is Yueyang, an area near the capital of Changsha in Hunan Province, China. This is where I was born and where I was adopted. I do not know much about my birth parents except that I was left on the steps of an orphanage in the early morning. Later, I was named Huang Ying, which means golden voice, after the Golden Oriole found in China.

In second grade, we were learning about China in history class. The teacher was very mean as she showed photographs of Chinese people. She pointed out their slanted eyes, and their black hair. She even made fun of their clothes by telling us that some pants had holes in the bottom so children could do their business in the streets. That is when I tried to hide that I was Asian. I had been using my Chinese name, but I switched it to my Italian name: Michaela. At night, I would open my eyes really wide and hold them until they started to sting.

Later, we had to do a project on our ancestry. I told the class I was adopted and some children gasped as I said this. I told them that my father was Italian-American, and my mother was Venezuelan with Russian and Ukrainian parents and ancestors from Mongolia, France, and Sweden. After my presentation the whole class had questions for me. "Do you miss your real parents? What does it feel like to live with strangers? How can you be Italian too... they aren't your blood parents!"

I was bullied with words and questions. I felt as though my classmates wanted me to leave my parents and go back to China. I felt really uncomfortable talking about my family- my mom and dad. I felt so miserable that I almost started to believe what they said about me. What was wrong with me? What could help me?

The one thing that helped me stop feeling self-conscious and lonely was when I began to train intensively in classical ballet. It does not matter where I come from or what language I speak. The common language of ballet is through my body and movement. Learning and meeting dancers has been really exciting for me. I get to learn more about their lives and the hardships they have had to face. Some of the dancers even come from Hungary, Japan, and Cuba. Though they have an accent and they eat different foods and have different stories, they manage to pull off a beautiful performance. I really enjoy watching many people of different cultures gathered together on one stage creating something so that others can benefit from and enjoy.

I am now at a new school. At first I thought that I would not have many friends. I assumed that they would judge me and label me as an adopted Asian kid. Thankfully, this has turned out to be wrong. I have many friends at my new school and I feel comfortable sharing my stories with my new friends. Coming to this school has made me realize that there has never been anything wrong with my family or me. It was the children at my old school who were wrong in their idea of what makes a family. A family is not just made up of similarities and genetics. A real family is bound together with love. Love is the true substance that creates a family and keeps the family together until the very end.

Like my namesake, the golden oriole, I have flown free, soaring above the prejudices and singing my own melody, sharing it with others. This mile that I walk has its bumps and turns, with many paths to choose. Through it all, the shoes I wear connect the many roads and cultures into one path: my own.