

## Listening to Myself

By Gabriella Straker, age 18 | Queens, New York



Growing up in Miami, Florida is something I am extremely grateful for, and a part of my heart will forever be there. But as I found myself in a new city, I began to find myself. When I moved to New York City at age nine, I was a very shy, introverted child in a new school and a completely new state. My nystagmus, blonde hair, and light skin proved curious in a sea of brunettes.

If there is one thing my parents have taught me to do, it's self-advocating. So, when my classmates asked questions, I tried my best to explain my situation. However, one of the many responses I received was a label as a *Liar*. And it hurt. My parents could tell me that they loved me, but the world didn't, and it was absolutely devastating. I had no palpable way to prove that I was actually Black, or actually Hispanic.

I faced more stares, pointing and whispering than I ever had before. I felt dismissed from the world, and I reverted into myself more than before. I let this get so far into my thoughts that I truly began to wonder if me and my twin sister were adopted. I remember looking through old pictures and seeing my mother's stomach when she was pregnant. Guilt washed over me; I was ashamed. I let myself play into the thoughts of others instead of listening to my own.

Even though I knew who I was, there was a part of me that felt like something was missing. And luckily, my family and I found it. I remember my first NOAH event as if it were yesterday. My family and I drove to a mini-conference in New Jersey, and for the first time in my life, I saw people who looked like me. Kids who were blonde, glasses wearers with

bouncy eyes, just like me. My first NOAH conference was San Diego, 2014. NOAH is a community that I never thought I could have, and one I never imagined.

I love my blonde hair and being the only blonde in the room. Accepting myself as a person of color with albinism was much harder. I'm now eighteen years of age, and I am still learning. NOAH's overwhelming love, my friends with and without albinism, and my family have shown me that it's okay to be different. Finding myself went further than being told I was beautiful: it had to do with me feeling beautiful inside. My differences are what set me apart from others, and that makes me valuable. Finding people who completely accept me for who I am has been a blessing.

I'm now a senior in high school, and I know that I can do my part to make this world more accepting and inclusive to others. Whether that means to stand up for someone, vote for change, or uplift the voices of others, that is my responsibility as a human being. Rapi Kaur once said, "*How you love yourself is how you teach others to love you,*" and learning how to love myself is the most important thing I could've done.

***"How you love yourself is how you teach others to love you,"***

***~ Rapi Kaur***