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Am I Middle Eastern: What Are You?

The narrator discusses how her multi-ethnic background was once a source of confusion and insecurity. She recalls the event that brought her closer to self-acceptance and to her Middle Eastern family.

This is Kayla Reban for Voices of Race and Change.

“What are you?”

As a child, I was asked that question a lot, and each time I heard those words, they filled me with anxiety. I knew that the person who asked the question really wanted to know why I looked so different.

My mother is Irish, Italian, and Czechoslovakian. My biological father is Saudi Arabian.

He left when I was a baby. When I was six years old, I saw a photograph of him and that alone was enough to confirm everything I believed I hated about him and myself.

He was the reason I had thick, frizzy, dark hair that never allowed me to look as pretty and polished as my best friend, Olivia, who had the smooth, golden-blond hair of her Polish ancestors.

He was the reason I had dull brown eyes framed by dark bushy eyebrows, when I would have preferred to have light green eyes like my mother's—the kind that sparkled when she laughed.

He was the reason my skin turned an ugly grayish-brown when I played outside in the sun for too long.

In 5th grade, my classmates and I were instructed to research our family backgrounds. We were to make a presentation for the class and dress in clothing that reflected our family's culture. Since I'm one eighth Irish on my mother's side, I wore all green and put freckles on my face with a red magic marker. The freckles still looked brown against my skin, but I knew that if my classmates knew what I really was, they would hate it as much as I did.

When my mother got remarried to an Iranian-American man, I was given an up close look at a culture that was very different from the one in which I grew up.

My new father and his family adored me. They were nice enough, but they ate weird food, spoke a different language, and seemed to have even more troubling hair problems than me. Since I only wanted to understand life as a white American, I kept my distance.

That changed after Muslim extremists attacked the World Trade Centers. I was 13 years old. The Sunday following the attack, I went to church with my mom, hoping to find solace in the service.

But as the pastor began to discuss the 9/11 attackers, he progressed into an angry rant about the inherent evil that runs through the veins of all Muslim people. He said they were just born "bad".

I was heartbroken.

This was the first time I had ever heard anyone else say hateful things about Middle Eastern and Muslim people out loud and it wasn't just a blow to me, but it challenged the goodness of my new family. Each person in that family had been raised Muslim and each person was more loving, caring, and accepting than anyone else I knew.

In that moment, I realized that there was a real hate and misunderstanding that went beyond my childish notions of what was pretty and desirable and what was ugly and unwanted.

Evelyn Baez-Rojas is a clinical psychologist who was born in the Dominican Republic. As a child, she also felt insecure about her non-white physical features. In her family, the people who had dark skin, curly hair, and flat noses were not considered beautiful. Her interview is in the Race and Change Oral Histories

archives in Special Collections at the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Evelyn talks about her grandmother chasing her with a brush and being disappointed that she had curly hair.

Like Evelyn, I still straighten my hair. I also get my eyebrows waxed and I try to stay out of the sun. But after my experience in church that day, I became much closer with my Persian family. I learned more about their culture so that I could provide other people with information and experiences that would give them a positive perception of Middle-Eastern and Muslim people.

And now when someone asks, "What are you?" I am happy to explain.

Voices of Race and Change: The Younger Generation is produced by students in Dr. Kitty Oliver's Multimedia Practicum at Florida Atlantic University for the Race and Change Initiative multimedia project. This is Kayla Repan. Thanks for listening.