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### My Greatest Challenge

The definition of "different" is unlike in nature, form, and quality. Growing up as a colored (biracial) student in a predominantly white community, I often felt like I was living in two worlds. I wanted a way out, but I was told that I had no choice but to stay. I was told that it was my only option to succeed and get into a good college. In a way, I felt stuck and abandoned. I would be the first in my family to go to college, so I understood my mom's goal was to get me there. In school, I was surrounded by classmates who didn't look like me, didn't understand my experiences, and sometimes made hurtful comments with or without realizing the impact of their words. I struggled to fit in and to find my place in a world that seemed to favor those who didn't look like me. I lost sight of my worth and value. The weight of rejection and expectation that began to crush me. The assumption that others knew who I was or what I represented was and is extremely damaging.

People take what you look like and presume that they know your thoughts and intentions, which denies you the opportunity to express your own identity. Feeling different from others is a deeply distressing experience that takes a significant toll on your emotional and mental health. The fear of rejection, judgment, and social exclusion is truly overwhelming. It reinforces feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. The emotional and mental pain of feeling different stems from a deep-seated need for acceptance, validation, and connection with others. The constant pressure of

everyone seeing you according to your skin's social expectations and the burden of rejection create a suffocating sense of being misunderstood and misrepresented.

I faced biases like, "Of course she's fast, she's black," or "Of course she can jump high; it's natural for them." These comments might have been meant to be compliments or jokes, but they only tarnished my hard work and dedication. I felt like I was being boxed in, pigeon-holed into a predetermined ideal of what I was supposed to be. My school and coaches used me as a token of diversity, parading me around in photo shoots to add me to promotional materials but wouldn't give me the acknowledgment or recognition I deserved. My volleyball scoring statistics were lowered and changed, so I wouldn't be first on the charts. I had to hire staters to rewatch all my games and stat just to get me into college. It was a heartbreaking realization that I was being used, manipulated, and exploited for the benefit of others. I knew that I had to stand up for myself, to demand respect, recognition, and equality. This was a plot-turning moment for myself where I realized that my voice and experiences were worthy of being heard. I refused to be silenced and devalued any longer. I knew that I needed to speak out to advocate for change.

This journey I've been through has been rough, but it taught me to embrace my identity and to use my voice to speak out against injustice. I plan to continue advocating for change by helping to create an inclusive and equitable society for all. My past is why I want to open my own school and athletic program, somewhere I can foster my own designed curriculum and education system. This way I can help to nurture positive values and diverse ideals from a young age. In my school diversity will be celebrated and embraced. Students of all backgrounds will not only be welcomed and valued, but their own cultural experiences, history, and perspectives will be

recognized and taught in a healthy learning environment. Athletes won't be held to pre-set standards or to an certain ideal of what they should be. I want to create a space where students feel empowered to be themselves, a school that promotes empathy and understanding. Opening a school allows me to set a foundation for generations to come. It's how I plan to create a peaceful and safe society.