

Becoming comfortable with being different

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Bruce carefully peels a dining hall orange over two sheets of paper towel. We sit in a study room of the library where I have come to hear his unique story. Sunlight pours in through the window, drawing patterns on his grey winter coat. I have seen Bruce around campus before, but never had the chance to talk with him.

“ I decided to go to a boarding school, not because I didn’t like my home or anything, but because it was different,” he explains to me before popping a slice of orange into his mouth. “ If you literally just leave my apartment building, it’s practically the opposite of whatever you see when you leave my dorm.” Bruce is now a sixth former, and is fully adapted to the aspects of boarding school which once made it seem foreign to him. Already accepted into Brown, he is savoring his last two terms here while simultaneously planning and dreaming about his future as a pre-med Brown University student. However, Bruce was not always so at home at school, and his future was not always so clear.

During much of his childhood, Bruce felt “ different.” At his elementary school in the Bronx, his teachers took notice of his particularly strong academic performance, one that made him stand out among his peers. “ They tried their best to get me out of that school and into a more challenging, more nurturing environment,” he says. And, they did. Bruce was accepted to the George Jackson Academy, an independent school for boys from low-income families.

“ I guess I just sort of emerged,” his voice trails off for a moment, “ as someone who was smart,” he continues with an apologetic laugh. “ I’m from

the inner city so I guess if you think about all of the stereotypes that come along with that, you think, probably, of a violent neighborhood, a place that's dangerous for someone to grow up. And, yeah, that's true," he says.

Additionally, high school graduation rates for boys in the Bronx hover around just fifty percent. Because of this, Bruce attests that his switch to George Jackson Academy was highly beneficial for him and that his life would be vastly different had he not been given such an opportunity.

In eighth grade, Bruce applied to five schools on his own accord. In ninth grade, he came to a New England boarding school. Like many, he was drawn to it because it seemed to be an intimate community. However, his arrival on campus told a different story. " In terms of the cultural differences, there were many, obviously," he says of the uncomfortable " adjustment period" that he faced.

Again, Bruce felt different from his classmates, but, this time, it was not his test scores that set him apart. " It took a lot of getting used to," he says, " to basically live with girls, live with other people my age, to be an introvert, and to not be as wealthy as everyone else... Racially, there was no one in the school who looked like me," (Bruce is part-black and part-Indian.) The feeling of being different, coupled with his introversion, made him wary of socializing with people to whom he could not relate. " Walking through the mall made me feel like I was intruding on a Polo Ralph Lauren photo shoot," he recalls. " It was just sort of a weird dynamic that I was foreign to," he says.

After eating the orange, he arranges pieces of its rind in a sort of pattern on the sheets of paper towel. It is obvious that he is thinking hard about his journey through school. He talks about how he has changed since freshman year. "Over the years, living here, thinking more, and joining clubs that have to do with who people are," he says, "has shown me that all of [those differences] are so insignificant." But Bruce knows that many students, especially new ones, still feel uncomfortable about their differences, which is one of the reasons why he is so involved in these clubs.

He is an active member of both the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force and Culture Alliance as well as a head of the Gay-Straight Alliance and the Humanist Group. All of the clubs that Bruce participates in offer a safe haven for students who are in the minority. Another reason for his dedication to the aforementioned clubs, Bruce says, is his natural inclination to help people and care for them, a tendency which he attributes to his mom. Bruce stops fiddling with the orange peel and looks up at the ceiling. "My mom is the best person that ever existed," he says assuredly.

"When I came out to my mom as bisexual she was just like, 'Ok. I still love you,'" Bruce continues. He recalls a similar reaction when he told her that he, having been raised Catholic, had decided that his beliefs aligned with humanism instead. He also says his mother's work as a home health aide translates directly into his own career aspirations of becoming a doctor. "The idea of taking care of people, and putting someone else's needs before your own, and just the magnanimity of it was very noble to me," he says.

Additionally, the educational rigor of becoming a doctor was not daunting to Bruce, who continually showed an aptitude for science and math. During his summers, while his friends were hanging out or goofing off, Bruce would attend the Physician Scientist Training Program, a six-week program for minority students who want to become doctors. In junior high, the program consisted of attending six hours of classes, which were math and science related, for five days a week. During high school summers, he worked in labs at colleges such as University of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson Medical School, and Drexel University. He says that his time at the program was grueling.

“ It kind of killed my soul to work in a lab, because I really didn’t like it, but in terms of pursuing my goal of becoming a doctor, the program made sense to attend,” he says. In Fifth Form, Bruce took AP Biology and AP Chemistry, two courses which, when taken in separate years, elicit fear from most students. Although the workload was heavy, Bruce’s determination to be a doctor was, and continues to be, unwavering. Next fall, Bruce will begin his freshman year at Brown University, but for now, he is enjoying his last few months of high school. As our conversation comes to a close, Bruce stands up to leave, picking up his paper towels and orange rinds. I notice that he is wearing hot-pink Converse shoes. I ask him if he would have worn them when he was a freshman. He scoffs. “ No,” he says, “ I’m much more comfortable with who I am now.” Bruce is living proof that for many, high school starts out as a place where you try to hide your differences, but ends as a place where you can feel most free to let those unique traits shine through.