A couple years after I was born, my family decided that we were no longer going to live in a small garage in south central Los Angeles and that it was time to move, even if that required taking an extra job or working more hours. My father and mother were young, hard-working, Mexican immigrants with little education who wanted their son to have a better life. As a result, we moved several times to predominately Hispanic communities where my parent's lack of complex English would not necessarily be an impediment. We spoke Spanish at home and it was not uncommon to hear people speaking Spanish in our community, whether that be at the supermarket or a local restaurant. But in school, Spanish seemed to have a different connotation. If you were heard speaking Spanish, you were a "beaner" or a "wetback" and portrayed as somebody who had just crossed the border. As a result, I rarely spoke Spanish outside my home and actively tried to avoid others with broken English or a heavy accent.

It wasn't until I got to college and I began interning at my professor's law firm that I finally started using my Spanish outside of my household. A couple weeks after my internship started my professor asked if I could speak Spanish, and if I could translate for him with a client. I hesitated, but I told him I could do it if he needed me. After translating for that client and many other Latinos after that, I felt a trend emerge. Initially, the clients were anxious and frustrated, but after they started conversing with me their expressions changed. They were more at ease because somebody who both looked and spoke like them was attempting to help.

As a first-generation college student and only child, I understand the struggle of being alone and not having an advocate. I look back with regret for not helping and speaking to those kids with broken English in school who just wanted a friend. While I can't go back in time and change my actions, I can share my experiences now and in the future and continue to help people even if it's just with a simple conversation.

On a humid Sunday afternoon during my junior year of high school, I stood in the middle of my grandmother's kitchen, watching her knead the palm of my hand with her right thumb. Her left hand cradled my fingers for support, unable to aid because arthritis from decades of sewing had fused the joints of the last two fingers into a permanent partial fist. As she pushed the flesh back and forth, she listened to my mother tell her (in flawless Japanese) how I had to hand write 40 pages a week to keep up with my AP classes. "Wow," my grandmother responded (utilizing one of the few English words she had mastered). I was casually amused by the irony of a first-generation immigrant, who raised three children on a seamstress and gardener's salary, being stunned by my hardships.

The value that my mother and grandmother placed on education and hard work paved my path to an ivy league university with a full scholarship. And since 90% of my peers (and family) were implanted within a 20-mile radius of our immigrant community in Southern California, I was deemed "the girl who made it out."

However, when I stepped foot on campus, I found a different identity waiting for me—the low-income, woman of color from a single parent household. This identity manifested itself in a variety of descriptions: "the girl who always had to work," "the mixed Mexican," "the affirmative action recruit." All of my life efforts had led me to become a student at one of the most prestigious institutions in the nation, and instead of being seen as a successful minority, I was quickly typecast as a victim.

I instantly rebelled, once again using education and hard work to prove that I was more than a color, a gender, or my parent's income. But as I prepared to fight, I began to see that the opponent was my history, my ancestors, my grandmother. I struggled between being proud of my past and being defined by it. To preserve the remains of my pride, I began to direct my frustration elsewhere, questioning the hierarchies, systems, and people that led to my classification.

My resentment culminated in a conversation about race with Katy, an upper middle class white woman (who I readily identified as a classifier). I tensed my jaw before she spoke, preparing to have to play the part of the “diverse perspective,” obliged to validate her thoughts. “I’m not a colonizer. They don’t know my story, my family. I never want people to think I’m dangerous or I think a certain thing because of my skin.” She over enunciated skin and offered her white arm for proof that there was nothing inherently sinister in her lack of melanin. Surprised by her vulnerability, I shared my own. She responded, “but you shouldn’t have to feel like that.” And I mirrored, “But *you* shouldn’t have to feel like that.” It was this mutual acknowledgement that brought my frustration into context, showing me I had gained through my loss.

Although I had lost a clear-cut understanding of my identity, I had uncovered a refined concept of myself. I had observed that when faced with difficulties that make me question my core, I had the power to turn that turmoil into empathy.

Katy’s situation differed from my own. The pressures (both societal and internal) made our struggles unique, but that did not preclude us from supporting each other and providing the simple act of acknowledging the power of the other’s perseverance. When reflecting on what primed me for this evolution, I am brought back to that sunny afternoon in my grandmother’s kitchen, where my support system acknowledged my perseverance with the massaging of my palm.

I didn’t pronounce the word *almond* correctly until my senior year of high school. The shape of the opening *a* was modeled after my mom’s Mexican accent, tall and open. No one corrected me until late in my teens, when my close friend chuckled and instructed me on the proper, American way to pronounce the word. I blushed, a little embarrassed, and corrected a consequence of my first generation immigrant upbringing.

I grew up in Minnesota as the daughter of Mexican parents. As soon as I entered public school, I began to feel the dissonance that enveloped my presence in a very white suburb, like a persistent pairing of notes that never reached harmony. It echoed in the Spanish I spoke with my parents and rang out with the *arroz con frijoles* in my school lunchbox. The clashes I encountered were loud and disarming, even though I was the only one who heard them.

Over the years, I have come to realize that once you hear that dissonance and feel it resonate deep within your bones, you listen for it everywhere. I heard the same sound when I read the texts of the esteemed Western canon in college, and I hear it in my job when my clients try to find justice in the New York legal landscape as survivors of domestic violence. This insight has become inextricable from my identity and invaluable to my professional aspirations.

As my peers and I study law and legal institutions that are deeply scarred by our country’s bigoted past and present, it is crucial that we recognize how our own discipline amplifies the dissonance that many in our country feel their very presence here begets. With the privilege of a legal education and career comes the responsibility to undo the damage that this pattern of injustice has done. Having students in the classroom and lawyers in the courts who, due to their own experiences, can hear these clashes and listen for these conflicts is essential for such an undertaking. At Harvard Law School, I am confident that my voice can provide this critical perspective, even if I mispronounce a word or two.

Holding true to the Colombian tradition of making three wishes every time one enters a new church, I would immediately dedicate one to "fixing myself." The Catholic Church, the cornerstone of Hispanic life and one of the few vestiges that connected me to my Colombian heritage, declared my sexuality amoral, and I wholeheartedly believed that dogma. Colombian relatives believed it as well, adamantly supporting a national referendum that forbade the adoption of children by same-sex couples and spouting homophobic hatred in our family WhatsApp group. I lived in silent dread of them discovering my sexuality; but I was more terrified of accepting it myself.

I latched onto my self-loathing throughout my first three years of college, to such a degree that I found myself perpetuating the same cycle of oppression. I joined spaces that oozed toxic masculinity, and rather than protesting the use of the word "faggot" at fraternity events, I repeated the same word with disregard to how it degraded the humanity of others and myself. Toward the end of junior year, however, I realized my internalized subjugation was affecting my mental health as my nights turned sleepless and my relationships deteriorated. I saw myself as an imposter, not worthy of my friends' authenticity, and had begun to push them away so as not to hurt them.

Through the self-imposed exile, however, I began coming to terms with myself. I realized religion should not burden one's spirituality; friendships should not induce self-hatred; sexuality should be embraced, not repressed. An internship in Europe, where I met someone in a similar situation through the anonymity of the internet, led me to one of the hardest decisions of my life – coming out to myself.

After my internal embrace and realizing I possessed both the privilege and responsibility to fight homophobia, I decided to come out to my fraternity brothers. Their reaction will forever be etched into my brain – while I cried, everyone stood up, gave me an ovation, and embraced me. In the weeks that followed, I began talking about my experience as a closeted gay man to other chapters, and subsequently received messages from other men apologizing for spewing homophobic speech. This experience helped me realize that my narrative could aid people beyond the Greek life community. As a practicing Catholic, I can encourage other Catholics to challenge the Church's position on sexuality. As a Hispanic man, I can deconstruct antiquated beliefs of what it means to be "a man." As I continue to grow, I will proudly espouse my sexuality in the spaces I inhabit and advocate for people isolated from their own humanity.

Diversity Statement

Diversity has been forced upon me. If it weren't for multiple persecutions, my family would not have ended up spanning five continents. Just three generations ago we were all in Eurasia, then forced to flee. One grandparent ended up in Uruguay, another in Argentina, and the other two in Greece and Egypt. Argentina married Uruguay and Greece married Egypt, but once more, conflict and danger denied my family the privilege of homogeneity. During Uruguay's military dictatorship, my mother and her family moved to the US because they could no longer live with the fear and uncertainty of their business being bombed. In Egypt, my father, just a baby at the time, fled Nasser's restrictive regime with a cloth diaper full of gold, aiding his family to protect what they could. Then, Egypt married Uruguay and America was born. However this is not the story I am going to tell you. Instead, I want to tell you about Sophie.

Growing up, I was not a good big sister. Sophie would never admit that, but I know it is true. Maybe she doesn't remember the times I kicked her leg or scratched her arm, but *I* do. Maybe she never understood my jokes when I made fun of her in front of our friends, but *they* did. My sister Sophie, 18 months younger than me, was diagnosed with various developmental delays, both physical and mental. This, in turn, affected how my siblings and I interacted with her. From hearing impairments, to cataracts, to velopharyngeal dysfunction impairing her speech, Sophie expressed herself differently than we did. The inability to see, hear, and speak properly prevented her from effective communication. The most difficult part was her autism. It was frustrating trying to communicate with someone with so many challenges, such different perspectives, and nearly impossible to understand her way of relating to the world. Sophie expressed herself through behavior: hitting instead of saying "I'm angry," or pulling my hair instead of asking "please pay attention to me."

What hurt me most was that she didn't understand the pain she had caused me. Many times I looked at her with tears in my eyes, the knot in my chest too tight with anger and confusion, as I searched for some sign of remorse, guilt, even humanity, in my sister, but Sophie just sat there smiling. She didn't recognize the gravity of her actions. At the same time, I did not recognize that I had to make a greater

effort to understand her. My inability to relate to her further frustrated our relationship. I began to dismiss her opinions and ignore her actions.

However, slowly I came to learn that what she was saying and doing all made sense. I just had to see it from her point of view. I learned to listen to what she had to say, and to understand her even beyond her words. I learned that my version of "right" is not the only one. I learned to cede a bit of my pride and to make myself vulnerable to be wrong, in the commitment to understand her and what she had to offer.

After 22 years living under the same roof, I learned Sophie's language. I've learned that "I hate you", means, "I love you"; "get away from me", means, "I need you"; and, "I wish I didn't have a sister" means, "I appreciate you." It is not always easy to elicit the patience and humility necessary to understand Sophie, but my capacities to effectively listen and communicate are stronger because they are challenged each day. This extends outside the home, and beyond the scope of having a sister with autism. Listening, empathizing, and appreciating the diversity of expression is not something that is often taught in the classroom. However, having a sister with autism has helped attune me to the negative repercussions of failing to understand someone else's perspective, of dismissing the *other.*

I believe that the best of advocates robustly understand the other side of whichever debate they may face. However, at least in my circles, this has become too rare. In the classroom, I find that many of my peers listen to respond, instead of listening to understand. Interpersonal debates often become aggressive beyond hope of reconciliation, asserting one version of what's 'right' at the expense of the potential fruit of intellectual discussion. It is my ability to listen and understand that I believe sets me apart from the rest. From Sophie, I learned many lessons that carry over to my academic experience and help inform my approach to understanding diverse perspectives and experiences. Yes, my diverse ethnic and cultural background will help me relate to others, but this is futile in the absence of an ability to understand them. Seeing intentions instead of merely positions allows me to contribute a more nuanced voice to classroom discussions, while simultaneously listening to and absorbing all I can from my classmates and professors to become a better peer, student, and eventually, lawyer.