

My Identity

My Identity follows the story of Ashley, a Native-American Caucasian woman, as she explores how race, religion and family heritage can shape one's identity.

Author

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There are a lot of indigenous children that are forced into the foster care system and they end up having absolutely no link to their heritage.

It's basically like having your culture ripped from you.

Well I had a very like interrupted upbringing but I think that's because of 500 years of genocide and the trauma that I carry in my DNA.

I have a lot of identity issues because I don't know who my father is.

On my mom's side, her mother is like Caucasian and her father is Native American. I identify as Choctaw and white. My mom struggled with a drug and alcohol condition. She would go on these binges and sometimes she would like disappear for days or weeks at a time. I would be like not picked up from school and I would often like find my way home by myself.

I had open heart surgery at five years old and I remember when I was recovering being by myself, alone, screaming when I woke up realizing no one was there.

I was placed into the foster care system at the age of eight and I lived with my aunt and uncle. I have one brother and he's two years younger than me.

I was put in the system but my brother was not because he knew who his biological father was and I didn't know who my father is.

My brother's father he hired a lawyer and my aunt and uncle no longer had custody of me. When I was placed with my brother's father, there was no intervention of case workers. My aunt and my uncle were essentially my escape.

I was living in Chicago, Illinois with my brother's father. He was a former Chicago police officer and he also sold drugs.

I saw a lot of drug activity and people cooking crack on the stove top.

He was extremely abusive and, and often would pick my mom up from rehab and then purchase alcohol. He was the one that fed her addiction.

When I was twelve years old, my mother she overdosed. She was considered brain dead and kept on life support for five years.

After my brother's father was arrested I was raised by my cousins. My aunt did also have an issue with prescription medication and alcoholism, so later that's why I was placed with her daughter, who's my cousin.

My cousins were Sufi's, which is a mystical branch of Islam. So I was exposed to those things but my brother was not.

My brother lived with my grandparents in West Virginia. I didn't want to be separated but I didn't realize at the time, it was permanent.

I've had about 30 case workers. No one ever asked your opinion or cares what you think. I didn't really understand those decisions as a kid. But as an adult, like I kind of wish I had my brother.

I went to Catholic school. It was really diverse; a lot of people from different religions went there and I feel like it had an influence on essentially why later I became Muslim.

Just like being involved in a whole lot of school activities based around social justice with my religion teacher - and he's like this white, Irish Catholic like old man. He's pretty awesome. I feel like there's a direct connection between the indigenous people like in the Americas and with the injustices that Palestinians experience.

Being that I am Native, it's not a stereotype that we deal with issues of alcoholism. I felt like being Muslim would essentially be the right path for me because of the restrictions on alcohol and drugs as well as I felt the need for like spirituality and structure because I never had control of anything in my life.

I no longer have a relationship with my brother. I think it's very interesting because my brother and I look exactly alike in terms of our features but we're absolutely nothing alike in terms of lifestyle or personality. He actually recently had a baby and named his son Remington after a gun. He joined the military and he served two tours in Afghanistan.

I just wish that my brother didn't hate me for my religion. I love him and I wish that we had a different relationship. I chose the lifestyle of becoming a Muslim because of the things that we both went through.

As a young child I didn't have any mentorship roles, now I have mentors.

Such as Khaled M who's a Libyan hip hop artist.

I was able to create that community through my activism.

Music and the Arts - it's important because it gives a voice to the voiceless. It felt like a direct connection between those people and myself, being voiceless.

I feel like I became like obsessed with like childhood because I wasn't able to have a childhood myself. I'm a childcare provider and I want to pursue early childhood education and I also want to work with artists at the same exact time. Actually sometimes I do that; on the phone, like texting while pushing a swing at the playground.

I decided to share my story because I wanted to have a sense of empowerment and turn something that was really negative into a positive.

If I had one last thing to say to my mom, I would tell her that I wish she would choose life and I hope that she would love my brother and I.

“Since the making of this film, Ashley and her brother have reconnected. Although her brother does not agree with her, he told her that he does support her lifestyle and her life choices.”