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<p style="text-align:center">Just Like Everyone One Else</p>

When I was in elementary school. I played with the same Barbies as my friends, loved the color pink, My Little Pony was my favorite show, and putting on my mom's heels and imagining I was walking the runway made me feel fabulous. When I got to middle school, I realized many kids saw a boy acting like a girl as weird. Many people judge, bully, or discriminate against gay people for the way they live. Many people discriminate against us not because they genuinely think something is wrong with us but because of the societal norms in the Midwest. The societal norms that have been set in place for decades make kids growing up who aren't used to seeing a boy wear pink, paint his nails, or not being interested in sports as different or abnormal. Just because I have a more feminine voice, stand with my hip popped out, and have good taste people begin to make snap judgments of me and what I am genuinely like. The stereotypes for gay men are that they are annoying, loud, rude, and obnoxious and that they make people uncomfortable. But when people meet me, they see that I am not like stereotypes. And just because I match the appearance many think of when thinking of a gay white cis male does not mean we are all the same

Many kids on my sports teams would tell their friends about how they play with a gay kid and because of this, I shouldn't be allowed in the locker room. Something they don't realize is the absolute last thing I want to do before or after practice is be in the locker room with them. Since I was 8 years old, I've played lacrosse. I love the sport and I love being active. But after

this last year, I decided to quit. Not because of the terrible coaches, the difficult practices, or even the time commitment. But, because of the team. On every team there will be people you don't get along with; however, when you dislike over three-quarters of the team then you start to realize that maybe it isn't normal. Many of the players on my team would make fun of me to other players and even my coaches about the way I run,throw and even stand. One kid even went so far as to tell my coach that I shouldn't be in the locker room because "I like dudes". I wasn't even out at the time. The coach being the great huy he is did absolutly nothing about it other than to mention the converstion to me. He said "some of the boys feel... uncomfertable with you being so close to them in the locker room. Would you want to get changed in the bathroom? Or some kids even get changed in their car.". I chose to stand up for myself and told him "if their uncomfterable with me being near them they should've said that. But, I think I'm going to stay in the locker room, thanks for the suggestion though!" I think sports should feel like a team, a place you want to be. Not a place you dread even if you are gay. Most of the people on my team didn't even know me. They didn't even know my name. For the most part, they would refer to me as the gay kid. Near the end of the season, I had befriended some of my teammates. One kid who I am still friends with told me that at the beginning of the season, he thought the same as everyone else. That I was just an annoying gay kid. But when we started to know each other being gay didn't even cross his mind.

Many people have made comments about my personality and form of expression. Comments that have affected the way I act and how I look at myself. Some people have thicker skin than others, but no one can take comments about who they are almost every day without having some effect on their mental health. Since I was in preschool I've always been very expressive. I would express myself with my face, my hands, my body, and my voice inflections. Not many straight boys would use the same expressions or even one remotely similar to the ones

I use. So when kids would be talking to me regardless of the topic I always spoke and performed my words along with hand movements or big gestures. I started to get comments about the way I spoke or the gestures I'd make when talking. The more comments people made the more I felt I had to hide these forms of expression. It started by me "toning it down" around only certain people, including some of the class bullies and a couple of mean girls. But then I still was getting comments like, "Why do you use your hands so much? It's weird." or "Your voice is so high it's annoying." I soon realized that it was not just the bullies and mean girls who said these things. More of my peers began to notice how it is different to speak with enthusiasm even in topics I could care less about. When more and more people began making comments about how it's weird or gay that I speak with emotion, I started to not only "tone it down" around some, but I did it around all. To a point where when I started middle school I was almost a completely different person. So different I didn't even recognize myself. Since 7th grade, I've been working on getting my passionate self back. The old me that people thought was annoying only because they weren't used to a boy showing so much emotion towards topics like math, English, music, or anything other than sports. There are times when I catch myself acting differently because I've been trained to think that self-expression isn't manly. This is a social idea that affects gay men everywhere every day and is what keeps young kids inside the closet.

Gay men are often called rude or unprofessional. This has always confused me because what about sexuality has anything to do with the way you treat others? There is nothing about being gay that makes you rude or unprofessional in any circumstances. My first job was at a small restaurant in Anoka Minnesota. I got hired shortly after I turned 15. At that time I was still in the closet and would be very passive about topics such as relationships, and didn't show much of my personality. After about a year of working there when I started showing more of myself, I noticed a change in the relationship I had with my manager. He began giving me strange looks

and saying I needed to stop talking and do work. It confused me because I wouldn't do anything different than my coworkers. I would talk about my plans that weekend, the music I listened to, and the guys I liked. A month after my 16th birthday my manager pulled me into his office and told me he had to let me go. When I asked why he told me it was because of how I have been acting unprofessional in the past couple of months. This came as a shock because almost nothing had changed. I still greeted and sat customers with the same kindness and didn't have any bad relationships with my coworkers. My manager never talked to me before that day about my new "unprofessionalism". I thought maybe I did something to get on his bad side and that he was just a petty 40-year-old man. But a week after I got fired I asked one of my coworkers if my check was in and she said it was so I came to get it. When I got there my manager wasn't in and I had a chance to talk to my coworker. She told me that my manager was saying the reason he fired me was because of the "gay stuff" I would talk about. She was under the impression that since I wasn't noticeably a gay person when I was hired he didn't mind me. But when I started to feel comfortable with my coworkers knowing about my life and with my manager hearing our conversations about the men I was talking to, he fired me because he's homophobic. Is this for sure the truth? Maybe. I think that's the reason but I never spoke to him again so I truly could not say. Almost every day at my current job I hear about one of my coworker's lives or the people they're currently talking to. Never have any of them shared a similar experience to what happened to me. There has never been a time that I have brought up inappropriate topics at work that could ever be seen as unprofessional. I have always done my work efficiently and professionally just as my coworkers. But when a person above me discovered my sexuality I lost my job. Is this fair? Not and I was outraged when I found out. But there are some things that an argument with a 16-year-old won't help. I can understand where the stereotype gay men carry is that we're unprofessional. But just like any person, there are different ways you act around your

friends, family, school, and your job. Gay men aren't oblivious to this idea. They understand it far better due to many hiding their lives from most of the world for the early parts of their lives.

While there are lots of negative stereotypes about gay men, I've learned to accept and love them. Yes, gay men can be loud, yes they can have different forms of expression, and yes they can be rude., But, all of these things don't have to be negatives. Gay men being loud can come from a place of excitement and enthusiasm. Gay men expressing themselves is just that, self-expression in its true form. Gay men being rude is meant endearingly, not to truly hurt someone's feelings. My last story is about the time I snuck into a gay bar in Minneapolis. A little background, one of my old coworkers is 22 and lives in Minneapolis now and invited me to her house one night. When I stayed over (I told my mom I was at another one of my friend's houses who lives down the block from me) she had the amazing idea that we should go to a gay bar. When we got there she went in legally with her ID and then went to the back through the kitchen and opened a door for me. Surprisingly nobody asked a single question. When I got into the bar I saw it, the most amazing sight I've ever seen. It was a room where I was no longer the minority. That night will always be one of my favorite memories that I won't ever forget. All of the stereotypes listed in this essay were present in this room. But they were different. All the stereotypes I hated being associated with were revealed in this room. I saw men in the most extraordinary clothes yelling insults at each other. But these amazingly dressed men weren't offended or made uncomfortable by the words being said. They were impressed and eager to take the next dig back at the person who said their shirt looked like it was from the clearance rack at Macy's. After that night I felt almost reborn, which I know sounds stupid. But if you go your whole life only seeing snippets of what you could be or the people like you on TV, and hearing terrible things constantly said about your community and finally seeing it. The true unfiltered version of queerness you'd feel reborn to

I want to leave you with this: Stereotypes are in almost every situation not good. They can be used to oppress and harm groups of individuals based on people from the past displaying similar behaviors to one another. Though I believe some people fall into stereotypes, I don't think that the group or stereotype you belong to describes you or your life. And when it comes to gay men, some may be annoying, loud, rude, obnoxious, or make people uncomfortable. But, that doesn't mean that they are bad people. Also, just because people share similar experiences and stories with them doesn't mean they act the same way. So the next time you see a queer person with amazing style, a loud personality, and saying something out of pocket, don't look at them with hate, fear, or disgust. Look at them, and tell them, "You look sickening today!".