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Through My Eyes

"You can't look like everybody else, but you have to fit into the beauty standards." "You have to have a voice, but if you use it too much you're oversharing." "You have to look good, but not too good, you'll make them jealous." These are just some of the statements I've heard throughout my high school years from classmates, friends, relatives, and the list goes on and on. Some people, specifically several adults from older generations, attempt to throw their "worldly wisdom" onto the teenage girls of today. They say that I need to speak my voice but not contradict another person's opinion. They want me to believe that my worth doesn't come from how I look, but focus is placed on appearance. But maybe if I wasn't criticized for how I look, what I wear, my dreams, or my opinions, then it would be just a little bit easier. If people would step out and view me as the unique and bright individual I am, maybe I would start believing ~~that~~ it, too.

I have blonde hair. I have blue eyes. No one ever had a problem with it when I was younger, but since I started high school, I have felt those traits being constantly attacked. Somewhere along the way, how I look also became associated with how well I am able comprehend certain topics or ideas from other people's perspectives. I remember hanging out in a group of about five friends. We had all been pretty close for years. During our time together we often play different types of games. One game we loved to play was similar to connections. Someone came up with words and then their partner had to guess what the category was. There

were two of us girls in this group. She had long brown hair and I had short blonde hair. Whenever I couldn't think of a good word or a category for the game the rest of my friends would say things to be like, "Are you really that stupid," "Oh she's just blonde duh," or "She's having a blonde moment again." I'd just laugh off these comments when in reality I was incredibly hurt by their words. After a few game nights and different events rolled past, I noticed that no matter how bad my other friend was at the game she never got made fun of. I didn't know how to speak up and tell them that I didn't like them making fun of me because somehow, I had become the punch line of our friend group. I even went as far as dying my hair brown, but that only made the teasing worse. I often remember coming home after hanging out and crying because I didn't understand why they were all so mean to be because I thought they were my friends. I am a very smart individual, and I deserve to be treated like one. No one has any right to judge someone on their appearance.

In addition to my appearance, I'd like to say that I am a particularly modest dresser. I like to follow the trends but add my own spin on them. I'm not sure when I came across that I was "asking for it" but apparently that is what some of the guys I've met, or dating have thought. I've been told, "you should wear this" as he holds up a pair of extremely tight leggings that I know I won't even be able to get on past my thighs. He made me question why I choose to not show everything off, but I remembered when I do wear clothes such as leggings, I get a lot of attention, but not the kind that I am looking for. It isn't right for anyone to tell you want you should or shouldn't do with your body. People should be able to choose how they want to dress and wear whatever they feel most comfortable in. There was once a guy who I dated who thought that because I was his girlfriend, he didn't have to listen to me when I told him to stop or when I was uncomfortable. After I got out of that relationship, I started opening to some trusted women in my life and nearly all of them had similar stories to share. Although not all had the

same reactions. There were a few "Boys will be boys," "Well, what were you wearing," or even a "You were probably asking for it." I can't understand how people could even justify saying those things. It blows over the victim's feelings and lets the perpetrator free. From my experiences along with some of the women that I know some men seem to get away with objectifying women or going too far and it is then blamed on the what the women was wearing or doing. This should not be the social norm that it has become.

If you didn't realize by now, I'm young. I may not have a lot of experience in the real world yet, but I'm not oblivious to what is going on around me. I have learned that I need to speak up for myself because no one else will; with time this has gotten easier. I began jumping into conversations in which I was knowledgeable about the topic whether that was gas prices, a biblical reference, or just telling someone about my day. I was shocked the number of times I was talked over or shhhed or even the classic "Yeah, yeah, yeah." There was even a time when I was in a full-blown conversation with someone and another person comes up and instantly, I am cut off and cut out of the conversation. It wasn't particularly by kids my own age, but by the older people in my life. I do think, however, that if I was a boy or even if I was a little bit older, people would take what I had to say more seriously. Originally, I didn't know how to react to it, sometimes I'd try to talk louder, or I would just silence myself. My favorite move, though, would have to be when I would just start talking to myself because I know at least I'll listen to myself. At that point, though, everyone just looked at me like "Who's the freak?" but I didn't care. I have valuable information to add to the conversation even if nobody seems to want to hear it. I have noticed as I get older that I have received more respect and attention from the older generation than I previously did. As much as I do appreciate it, I don't understand why I couldn't have gotten the same amount of respect in the past.

For some reason, I have heard throughout my life that girls don't need to get important college degrees or go for something that they are passionate about because they will just end up becoming stay at home moms anyway. I wasn't hearing this from parents or older people, but from the girls my age. There are three girls that I can think of off the top of my head who have all made this very clear to me. They all picked degrees that they have expressed that they have no interest in or that will just be a "Side gig" for them. Curious and confused when I hear this I ask, "How come" or "Don't you want to be passionate about your career." And their responses are a simple "No, I'm going to be a stay-at-home mom." I am floored every time by this statement. And that it's coming straight from the lips of an 18-year-old girl who doesn't even have a boyfriend at the time. Of course I want to be a mom, but not yet. I want to do something with my life and experience the world first. Women don't need to throw away a career to raise their children, it is possible to have both. My mom is the one who holds a job in our family and my dad is the stay-at-home parent. My whole life I have watched people criticize my mom for working, but why. She loves what she does, and she would never have known that if she hadn't given working a change. Girls shouldn't sell themselves short before even exploring what the working world could be like for them. Others shouldn't put the idea into their heads that all they are capable of is raising a family. Growing up in a household where my mom was the breadwinner it has always been clear to me that women can do whatever they set their mind to, just like a man. This being said, those same aspirations have not been shared with some girls my age, who think that being a mom is all that there is for them. I would like to say, I don't believe that. Women can achieve so much if they believe in themselves, and don't take the easy way out.

Ultimately, girls my age can be grouped into a gigantic pile of stereotypes when in reality it doesn't apply to them. Some people might think I'm dumb, stupid, or provocative, but I'm not. While writing this essay, I was able to understand that. No matter how people might see me from

the outside, they don't truly know the type of person I am on the inside. I can't take everything everyone has ever said or done to me and carry it with me through life. I need to say well that sucked and move on. There is a lot of baggage I have been carrying around for years because I thought that maybe that person would admit to being in the wrong and apologize, but they've most likely moved on and forgotten those conversations that ever happened. Setting those feelings free is like watching birds migrate for the winter; I know that they are off to a better place and that I am giving myself room to heal. So, the next time you think about making a corrective criticism about how someone looks or about what they are doing, think about how you would feel if they were saying that to you. How about these instead: "Your unique style is just what our world needs, someone who doesn't look like everybody else." "I am intrigued by your opinion, please tell me more." "You look lovely today."