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FLANC Sponsor and AP Instructor: Pamela Lim-McAlister

Dear FLANC,

I have been studying a number of world languages since I was young. My mom is from India while my dad is Ashkenazi Jewish, so I grew up learning Hindi to speak with my grandparents and began to study Hebrew in fourth grade to prepare for my Bat Mitzvah. In addition to speaking to me in those languages, my parents have helped me learn so much about my mixed heritage. I plan on continuing to study additional languages – specifically the UN’s Official Languages of Diplomacy – because I want to pursue a career in diplomatic or humanitarian work. Someday, I hope to travel around the world and contribute to efforts to pursue peace and improve living conditions for others who are living in areas where there is regular conflict or human rights are under attack.

I have already studied Spanish for over four years and was able to study abroad last summer and earn the Global Seal of Biliteracy through CIEE, thanks in part to a merit scholarship which then helped me join their Global Ambassadors program. Last fall, I participated in a number of efforts to get more students involved in learning new languages and studying abroad. I presented at a CIEE National Panel and shared with other language students at my school information on scholarship opportunities. Along with Spanish, I am currently trying to become conversational in French and plan to take community college classes in Arabic this summer and fall.

My essay explores both how world languages have enriched my life and how my own struggles with perfectionism and insecurity about not fitting in either of my cultures temporarily made me stop wanting to learn languages. Although they expanded my world and opportunities, I had been instead trying to learn them as a defense mechanism to ‘prove’ to others that I belonged. It took failing publicly on a big Spanish presentation to teach me that in reality, very few people cared about how much I appeared to fit in or how perfectly I spoke. By stopping myself from trying new things in case I couldn’t do them ‘perfectly’ as well, I had been my own worst enemy.

I now truly appreciate the enrichment that world languages bring to my life and how they have enabled me to travel, take risks, and embrace my culture. In the future, I can only hope that I’m lucky enough to continue to study more languages and discover even more ways that they can change my life for the better.

Thank you for your consideration of my essay.

Sincerely,

Leela Hensler

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Lowering the Language Shield

Like my kindergarten friends, I filled boxes with ‘treasures’ – a butterfly clip, pressed flowers, Barbie dolls. But in my mind, I collected something far more valuable: words. I plucked blessings in Hindi and Hebrew out of winter nights lit first by Diwali diyas and followed by Hanukah candles, memorized Bollywood songs after saying Shabbat prayers. Already, I noticed that being mixed-race was an invitation to have my identity questioned, but somehow, when I read a Haggadah or carried a conversation flawlessly, the pressure briefly lifted.

For years, I learned languages only to shield myself, changing from someone never ‘brown enough’ to blend into photos from both Purim and Holi celebrations to a social chameleon who could go from *בבית ארוחות בוקר לפני תפילת שבת* to *डांस क्लास के बाद मैंगो लस्सी पीते हुए*. But soon, my attitude towards language-learning reforged my shield into a double-edged sword. By middle school, I no longer viewed words and languages as treasures to cherish, but as standards to surpass. The more fluent or ‘perfect’ I became, the more I believed that one mistake in a Torah reading, one lapse in conversation during Kathak class, would reveal the truth: I wasn’t Jewish or Indian enough. I was mixed and I didn’t belong – but if I spoke just right, they’d never know.

As this fear spilled into my everyday life, I became convinced that perfection was necessary everywhere, not just mandir or synagogue. Though I loved Spanish, when faced with new grammar, rules, and vocab, I chose to retreat rather than risk messing up. In seventh grade, I would develop mysterious illnesses on presentation days, taking a grade drop over public failure. But in eighth grade, there was no escape: my teacher required bimonthly presentations.

However, despite my chronic over-studying, my best efforts at perfection...I choked. Blanking midway through, I closed my eyes, bracing for laughter. Yet all I heard were my teacher’s encouraging words, offering to let me finish when I was ready. What I believed would be the worst moment of my life ended up being nothing but another pause in a class presentation. After years of using language to hide my identity and meet impossible standards, I realized I was the only one upholding them.

I still struggle with insecurity and shyness, but I’ve tried to take risks which have changed my life for the better, from studying abroad in Barcelona to joining the choir at my synagogue. Languages aren’t a way to fit in, but instead a means to be wholly myself. Hebrew and Hindi allow me to speak to my grandparents, to explore both my Jewish traditions and Indian culture, while Spanish is just one of many languages I hope to learn as I pursue my dream career as a diplomat or ambassador. Today, the same languages I once viewed as weapons to defend myself are the very tools I hope to carry with me *en una vida y una carrera dedicadas a buscar la paz y la aceptación*.

