**Daniele Melia**

**New York University, Class of 2007**

**A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in the college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.**

I feel sick. I’m nervous and my stomach’s turning. The room is lined with neat rows of desks, each one occupied by another kid my age. We’re all about to take the SATs. The proctor has instructed us to fill out section four: “race.”

I cannot be placed neatly into a single racial category, although I’m sure that people walking down the street don’t hesitate to label me “caucasian.” Never in my life has a stranger not been surprised when I told them I was half black.

Having light skin, eyes, and hair, but being black and white often leaves me misperceived. Do I wish that my skin were darker so that when I tell people I’m black they won’t laugh at me? No, I accept and value who I am. To me, being black is more than having brown skin; it’s having ancestors who were enslaved, a grandfather who managed one of the nation’s oldest black newspapers, the Chicago Daily Defender, and a family who is as proud of their heritage as I am. I prove that one cannot always discern another’s race by his or her appearance.

I often find myself frustrated when explaining my racial background, because I am almost always proving my “blackness” and left neglecting my Irish-American side. People have told me that “one drop of black blood determines your race,” but I opt not to follow this rule. In this country a century ago, most mixed-race children were products of rape or other relationships of power imbalance, but I am not. I am a child in the twenty-first century who is a product of a loving relationship. I choose the label biracial and identify with my black and Irish sides equally. I am proud to say that my paternal great-grandparents immigrated to this country from Ireland and that I have found their names on the wall at Ellis Island, but people are rarely interested in that. They can’t get over the idea that this girl, who according to their definition looks white, is not.

Last year, at my school’s “Sexual Awareness Day,” a guest lecturer spoke about the stereotypical portrayal of different types of people on MTV’s The Real World. He pointed out that the white, blond-haired girls are always depicted as completely ditsy and asked me how it felt to fit that description. I wasn’t surprised that he assumed I was white, but I did correct his mistake. I told him that I thought the show’s portrayal of white girls with blond hair was unfair. I went on to say that we should also be careful not to make assumptions about people based on their physical appearance. “For example,” I told him, “I’m not white.” It was interesting that the lecturer, whose goal was to teach students not to judge or make assumptions about people based on their sexual orientation, had himself made a racial assumption about me.

I often find myself wishing that racial labels didn’t exist so that people wouldn’t rely on race alone to understand a person’s thoughts, actions, habits, and personality. One’s race does not reveal the content of their character. When someone finds out that I am biracial, do I become a different person in his or her eyes? Am I suddenly “deeper,” because I’m not just the “plain white girl” they assumed I was? Am I more complex? Can they suddenly relate to me more (or less)? No, my race alone doesn’t reveal who I am. If one’s race cannot be determined simply by looking at a person, then how can it be possible to look at a person and determine her inner qualities?

Through census forms, racial questionnaires on the SATs, and other devices, our society tries to draw conclusions about people based on appearance. It is a quick and easy way to categorize people without taking the time to get to know them, but it simply cannot be done.

**Leigh Rosen**

**University of Pennsylvania, Class of 2009**

**Describe a challenge you overcame.**

The stiff black apron hung awkwardly on my hips as I casually tried to tie the strings around my waist. I had been at Gino’s Restaurant for only ten minutes when Maurizio, the manager, grabbed my arm abruptly and said, “Follow me to the dungeon.” Unsure of whether or not he was joking, I smiled eagerly at him, but his glare confirmed his intent. I wiped the smirk off my face and followed him through the kitchen, which was louder than Madison Square Garden during a Knicks/Pacers game. A tall woman with a thick Italian accent pushed me while barking, “Move it, kid, you’re blocking traffic.” I later learned she was a waitress, and waitresses did not associate with the low-level busboys. Maurizio brought me to a dangerously steep staircase that looked like it had been purposely drenched in oil to increase the chance of a fall. As he gracefully flew down each step, I clutched onto the rusty tile walls, strategically putting one foot first and then the other. Eventually, I entered the “dungeon” and was directed to a table to join two men who were vigorously folding napkins.

Pretending to know what had to be done, I took a pile of unfolded starched napkins and attempted to turn them into the Gino accordion. I slowly folded each corner, trying to leave exactly one inch on both sides, and ignored the giggles and whispers coming from across the table. When I finished my first napkin, I quickly grabbed another and tried again, hiding my pathetic initial attempt under my thigh. On my second try, I sighed with relief when I saw that what I had constructed slightly resembled an accordion shape. However, when I looked up, I saw that the other two men had each finished twenty perfect napkins. “Hurry up, little girl,” they said in unison, “We have lots left.” They pointed to a closet overflowing with white linens as I began to fold my third. The next couple of nights afforded me the opportunity to master such tasks as refilling toilet paper dispensers and filling breadbaskets. Just as I began to find solace in these more manageable jobs, I felt a forceful tap on my shoulder. A heavyset waiter who was sweating profusely barked, “I need one decaf cappuccino. Understand?”

“Um, okay,” I stuttered, unable to get up enough courage to admit that I had never attempted to make a cappuccino. I glanced over at the intimidating espresso machine and started to pace back and forth. The waiter reappeared and with a look of irritation snapped, “If you didn’t know how to do it, why didn’t you say so? I don’t have time for this!” Returning to the unnecessary re-cleaning of silverware, the only job I could comfortably perform, it dawned on me that my fear of showing ignorance had rendered me incompetent. I had mastered the art of avoidance and had learned nothing. I continued to clean vigorously, making sure to keep my eyes on the silverware so that no one would ask me to make another cappuccino.

Having barely made it through my first weekend at the restaurant, I was amazed at how relieved I felt to return to the familiarity of physics class. We were starting a new chapter on fiber optics. Moving through the material with greater ease than I had anticipated, we hit upon the topic of optical time domain reflectometers, and sweat began to form on my chest as I frantically flipped through my notebook. I marked my paper with an asterisk so that I would know to ask my teacher to explain this material when I met with him privately during my next free period. My teacher then said, “So, I’m sure you all understand OTDR, so let’s move on.” As all of my peers nodded in agreement, I suddenly realized that I was still not asking how to make cappuccino. I took a deep breath and the fear of not learning overcame my usual fear of looking foolish and I raised my hand. After my question had been answered, I felt like the Red Sox lifting the curse. I erased the star I had made on my notebook and confidently listened as we moved on to the next topic.

I’m not suggesting that raising my hand and asking a question in physics class was a life-changing moment. It did not suddenly rid me of my fear of showing ignorance, but it definitely marked a new willingness to ask questions. When I returned to Gino’s the next weekend, I continued to spend some time unnecessarily cleaning silverware, but after asking Maurizio how to use the espresso machine, I soon added making cappuccino to my list of life skills.