

ON THE FENCE



STUDENTS CALL FOR CULTURAL VISIBILITY

STORY BY SOMER BENTON • PHOTOS BY CALEB ARIAS

Emiliano Warren
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Born in New York, senior Emiliano Campili Warren moved to California, Mexico, Argentina and finally Decatur after his father received various job opportunities.

Though Warren thinks his Argentine mother speaks English “amazingly well,” he feels her accent makes her more susceptible to deal with “aggressive individuals.”

During a taxi ride his mother received “inappropriate” comments and questions from the driver.

The driver inquired about where she lived and her family’s economic status. Warren’s mother felt threatened and wanted to leave the car immediately.

“You Argentines come in our country and take our jobs and estate,” the driver told her.

Warren thinks the same prejudiced remarks his mother received could be heard anywhere in the world.

Warren can’t recall moments where he personally has faced discrimination. On the other hand, Warren feels he can present himself as either “fully American” or “Argentine” with his ability to speak fluent Spanish and English.

“I have the option, if someone were walking down the street, to either be totally Argentine and speak Spanish, or I have the choice to be American and only speak English or the choice to speak both,” Warren said.

“If some redneck went to Argentina, he wouldn’t hear the end of it,” Warren said.

In order to evolve into a more developed world, he suggests people should consider everyone’s perspective.

“Sit on the fence instead of being on one side or the other,” he said. “If you only take one side, you never see anything but that side.”



Vanessa Leung
Hong Kong, China

Senior Vanessa Leung was born in Hong Kong and lived there until the age of two.

China boasts a variety of regional languages separated into eight groups. Both of Leung’s parents speak Cantonese, and her father is also fluent in Mandarin.

Her parents don’t talk about the way Asian culture is viewed as much as Leung, but the portrayal of Asian characters in American entertainment media insults her mother.

“The main thing that really pisses [my mother] off is when in movies, the actor will pretend like they’re speaking Chinese when they’re saying random sounds,” Leung said.

She feels that instead of representing the culture, they’re “mocking the language.”

“I know that in the past, with all races, [cultures] have been misrepresented by white actors, and the language has been completely botched up,” Leung said.

She has witnessed verbal discrimination in the media, but also experienced incidents in her personal life.

“I was biking on the Silver Comet Trail, and I said ‘Hi’ to a group of people to be polite,” she said. “After I passed them, I heard them yell ‘Konichiwa’ to me, which is Japanese for hello, but they saw that I was Asian and thought that it was a fun thing to do, like that was acceptable.”

Though this interaction might have just been a simple mistake, the bikers’ assumption of Leung being Japanese took her by surprise.

“We talk trash about [Decatur],” she said, “but I think something that’s really nice about [Decatur] is that we’re really tolerant of people



who are different.”

Leung thinks more exposure to other countries as a component of the IB World History curriculum, which includes Africa and the Middle East, will help “normalize” cultures outside of America.

“I’ve never gotten to learn about my culture and gotten to talk about it to other people,” she said.

To investigate why, she spoke with humanities teacher Kristen Embry about the lack of Chinese history instruction in her class.

From their conversation, Leung recognized that studying China’s history is “an all or nothing deal.”

Because of its complexity and density, Chinese history took a lot of

time in the IB World History curriculum, Embry explained to Leung.

“Either you talk all about it or nothing at all, because it would be a disservice to the country if you just dabble in it,” Embry told her.

Though Leung believes the world is becoming more knowledgeable of cultural differences, she feels “there’s a lot of instances where they’re just crossing the line.”

One example, Leung feels, is the misappropriation of Chinese food.

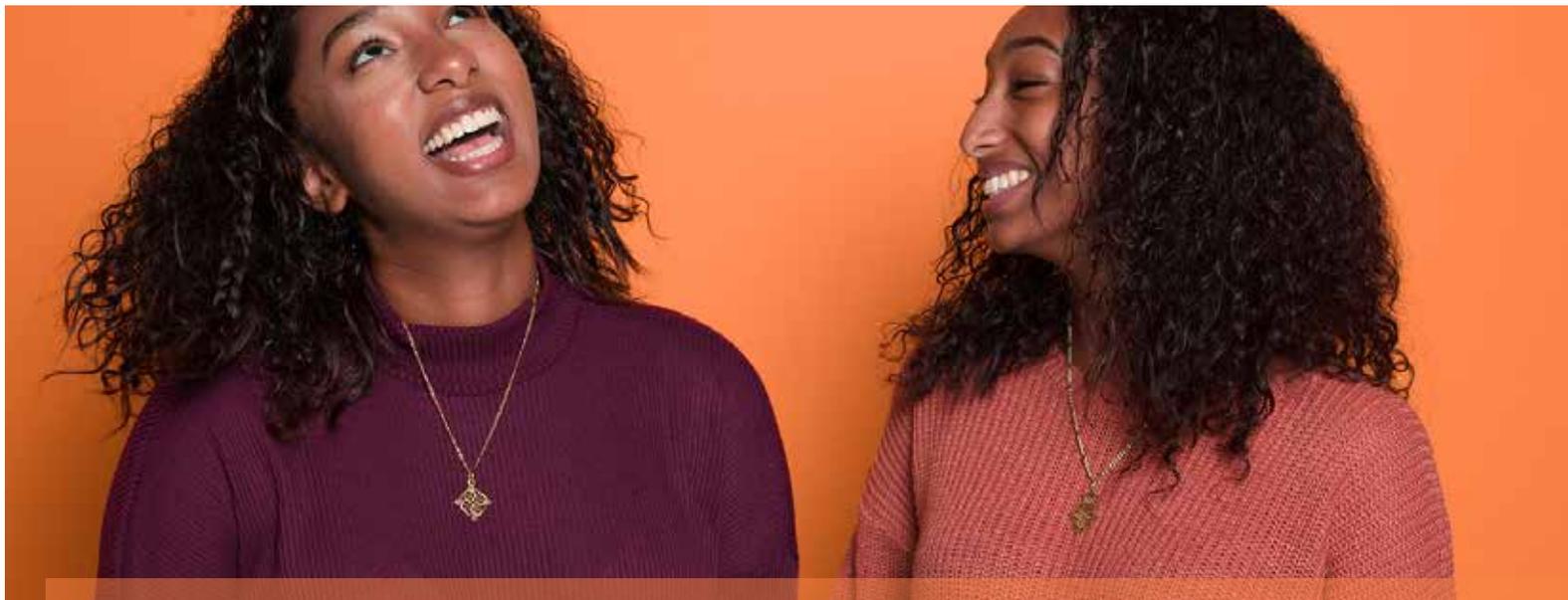
“I understand that when Chinese immigrants came over, they had to change their recipes,” she said. “First, because they couldn’t use certain [ingredients] and also to appeal to demographics of Americans. People will say, ‘I like Chinese food,’ but in reality, what they’re eating is not what is served in China.”

Another common misrepresentation of Asian culture is the use of chopsticks as hair accessories, Leung said.

In Asia, traditional hair accessories are called Kanzashi and their resemblance to chopsticks cause people to mimic the style by “tying their hair up in a bun and sticking chopsticks in it,” she said.

Similar to chopsticks, traditional kanzashi can be plain or decorated with meticulously drawn flowers.

“[Kanzashi] are much longer and slender, but they’re not actually used for eating,” Leung said



The Ethiopian crosses that Helen and Amber Daniel wear “all have the same intricate [lattice] detail.” The gold represents the wealth of Africa and can be found in various African flags. Daniel and her sister were raised as Orthodox Christians and were both given their crosses at a very young age.

Leung feels such acts “defeat the purpose” of demonstrating cultural awareness.

“Instead of portraying yourself as embracing another culture, you’re insulting it,” she said.

Leung suggests that more cultural exposure can have “a really big impact” on the world by taking them out of the bubble they usually live in.

Helen Daniel Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Students will say, “You’re not black,” senior Helen Daniel said, “even though that doesn’t make sense because I’m African.”

Daniel’s parents are native Ethiopians. After going to college in the U.S., they met in Atlanta where Daniel was born and raised.

While growing up in Atlanta, she learned Ethiopian cultural traditions, like giving Gursha, from her parents.

Gursha is a practice of communion that is shared with family and close friends.

“You have to accept [the meal],” she said. “There’s no real reason. It’s just disrespectful to deny it.”

Her mother would pour a spicy sauce over injera, a sponge-like bread. “A gursha is giving love” and typically involves a finger food meal.

Besides some cultural lessons and trips to Ethiopia, Daniel and her sister were raised “completely American.”

“We don’t really have [Ethiopian] family or culture around us,” she said.

Daniel encounters prejudiced remarks because of her Ethiopian background.

“I’ve been picked on for being different, eating something different, having a parent with an accent,” Daniel said.

Unlike Leung, Daniel believes Decatur is not as welcoming to diversity.

Last year, Daniel’s eleventh grade world literature teacher prompted her and her classmates to write down everything they knew about Africa. Many of the responses Daniel heard came as no surprise.

“A lot of people think that Africa is a poor place, and I can see why because the only thing that you see on commercials and on social media is starving children,” Daniel said. “You only hear about the bad things like genocides and famines.”

She said that people tend to limit their ideas of Africa to strife and inequality.

“That’s all you hear about,” Daniel said. “You never hear about how the middle class is getting stronger, which means the economy is getting stronger.”

Along with the economic criticism, Daniel receives off-putting comments about her hair

from her peers.

“[People] complain about their hair then say, ‘Oh Helen, you have nice hair. You don’t have nappy hair. You don’t have black people hair,’” Daniel said. “I don’t understand because I’m not the only black person with this type of hair.”

She noticed a rise of Americans wearing traditional African hairstyles.

“Lately, I’ve been seeing people with cornrows,” she said. “One [braid] would be skinny and the other would be bigger. That’s an Ethiopian hairstyle.”

Daniel sees African culture reflected in clothing and dance styles as well.

“It’s funny because a lot of people have looked down on African Americans for doing the things that they do,” she said.

Being African, Daniel believes she is more respectful and open-minded to others who come from different backgrounds.

“I know not to judge people based on who they are,” she said.

Daniel said her experiences have made her well rounded and more respectful to the people around her. ■





Supportive Fan and Player

"I can say with pride that everyone does love Messi," Warren said. Lionel Messi is the captain of Argentina's national football team. Warren loves to play soccer and is the goalie on his team.



Handcrafted Clothing

Daniel last visited Ethiopia in 2009 which is where she picked out this skirt. Traditional Ethiopian clothing is handmade with cotton, and sometimes designed with stitching and beading.



Gifts of Longevity

The Mid-Autumn festival is celebrated in China when the moon is said to be at its highest and fullest. Mooncakes are one of the popular treats sold, gifted and eaten as families and friends gather to wish each other long lives.