

My First Childhood Memory understanding I was Arab-American

It all started in December and my class was assigned a holiday project. The project was to research a traditional holiday. I did not know much about Christmas in Palestine, so I decided to research it and incorporate this in how we celebrate traditionally. I told my teacher about my topic, and right away she wanted to have a parent-teacher conference. As the conference began, my teacher told my mom it was about my project's topic. My teacher's argument: You can't do a Palestinian Christmas if there is no such thing as Palestine. I thought, "How ridiculous is that?" That is what I am – is she denying me my identity? My friend can do a typical French Christmas, yet I can't do a Palestinian one?

I always knew I was an Arab-American. I love traditional Arabic food, my grandparents speak Arabic, I go to an Arabic speaking church, and I've even danced in Dabke troops. I never felt different from my friends, being Arab-American was just who I was. I truly knew what it meant until that day.

After I told my mom the teacher wanted a conference, there was a curious look on her face. I excelled in academics and she didn't know what was wrong. My teacher started by asking my mom if she knew my topic. My mom then said "a Palestinian Christmas." My teacher went on to say that I couldn't do that topic because there is no such thing as Palestine. My mom, a little angry, said that our family is Palestinian, and being that, we have many unique customs and traditions. "How can you be Palestinian when there is no Palestine?" my teacher answered. My teacher just did deny us, me and my family, our identity.

I was a little confused because I thought teachers were the smart ones. That was the first experience I had that singled me out as not only an Arab-American, but a Palestinian-American. It was the first time that I felt I was different because of my Palestinian heritage, I always understood that being Arab made me unique, but not an outcast. I feel there is nothing wrong with being Arab-American, just like there is nothing wrong with being Spanish-American or Italian-American, because that was who I am.

This experience made me want to educate others about what it is to be an Arab-American. I made an effort to expose my teachers and classmates to my Palestinian heritage. I bring it up in conversation, I bring in Arabic food for them to try, sometimes I will teach them Arabic words and phrases. I incorporate my heritage in many school projects – I taught my group to Dabke for one project, and learned Arabic songs to play on my Violin for another. I used to take for granted I was an Arab-American. It took a teacher's ignorance to make me realize what being an Arab-American meant.