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I Am Not Who You Want Me to Be

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Brittany Barron, Graduate Teaching Fellow- Georgia College & State University

I Am Not Who You Want Me to Be

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ABSTRACT: When entering college, many students are presented with a variety of organizations to be involved in. This may include participation in sports, fine arts, clubs, or even Greek life. As a college freshman, I chose to participate in Greek life. This descriptively comical, yet personal narrative addresses a rarely approached and insightful perspective into cultural identity. As a new potential member joining a sorority, there exists complex inner conflicts which challenge many young women's self-identity, values, and potential. I stood out amongst my Caucasian affiliates as an African American, and the pressure to fit in was even greater. In the narrative, *I Am Not Who You Want Me to Be*, my experience in Greek life is illustrated in great detail, and through the eyes of an African American woman. From the struggle of deciding to affiliate outside of my culture's stereotypical expectations, to reevaluating my self-identity, I am led to discover my true values of what it means to be a part of an empowering organization.



There are few who have not experienced the feeling of being an outcast and not fitting the mold of what people expect you to be. Perhaps one may feel out of place at a moment in time, like a red rose in a bed of white flowers. My journey through the sorority recruitment process as an African American female was unique, as I had to remind myself that I am more than what is expected of me. As I wrote this memoir, I wanted to share the experience of dealing with racial identity from the eyes of a young African American woman, from a southern metropolitan city, attending a predominantly white university in rural Georgia; and finding her way through the beginnings of a predominantly white Greek life.

“Be yourself,” my mother told me moments before I would be interviewed by girls in eight different sorority chapters. It was move-in day for freshman girls participating in recruitment. Not only was it hectic, but we were not given much time to say goodbye to our family members as this would be our first time as young adults living away from home. My final goodbye to my grandparents was bittersweet as my agenda was packed with so many sorority events that day, but I was saddened that there was not much time spent with family. Luckily, my mother stayed an extra night at the hotel to help me get ready for the big day.

At this moment, as I glanced in the mirror watching her place bobby pins in my kinky curly hair, I soon felt a sense of reassurance. Mom had always provided these words of encouragement before any momentous event in my life, and this one was no exception. We had talked in length about some of the clubs and activities of interest on campus. The topic of joining the cheerleading team came up in short discussion, but I quickly dismissed it as I was looking for aspects of sorority life that competitive cheer could not offer. I must admit that the Disney club intrigued me for

obvious reasons; who wouldn't want to take trips to see The Mouse? The subject of academic clubs such as the Physics Club were also approached, but one subject that was repeatedly part of the conversation revolved around sorority involvement. Although my mom didn't join a sorority when she attended college, she encouraged me to explore this option because she could see the immeasurable enthusiasm in my face each time I talked about it. We spoke a bit about the recruitment process, and she reminded me that I couldn't be shy, and that there is only one opportunity to make a first impression.

In the South, Greek life is as embedded into the college culture as SEC football. For me, the feeling of immense excitement, to the point where I couldn't sit still, and anxiety was overwhelming as the first day of my university's Panhellenic Recruitment approached. I overheard a few of the Pi Chi's, or sorority group leaders, discussing how this was one of the largest recruitment classes in the university's history. There would be approximately 500 freshman girls traveling a week before classes started, from their hometown to a small, southern college town in rural Georgia to participate in the recruitment activities.

On Friday, the night before the start of recruitment events, all potential new members were required to attend a meeting to discuss the upcoming hectic event known as Rush Week. The moment I walked in, a room full of unfamiliar faces gazed in my direction. Without delay, a tall young woman with brown hair and hazel eyes eagerly greeted me as I sat down. Shortly after, she spoke aloud and introduced herself as our group leader. Throughout the discussion, many girls voiced their concerns about the selection process between sorority houses. *How will we narrow down the houses? Will every girl be placed in a sorority house? What if we don't get selected for any of the houses?* These were some of many questions asked.

All of a sudden, the recurring feeling of uneasiness and racing thoughts consumed my body. Most of the other girls, including myself, were concerned about selecting the right outfit, finding the perfect shoes, ensuring our eye shadow was blended with perfection, asking

intriguing questions, and not asking enough questions. However, I had a unique concern. I glanced around the room, and didn't see girls who looked like me. I saw girls with blonde or brown hair, light skin, and light eyes. I felt slightly out of place as an African American girl...

That night, I was restless as my mind filled with apprehension. In the midst of worry and nervousness for the big day ahead, I went on an internet mission to gather intel on whether or not this school's sororities had ever selected an African American. The eagerness I once had for Rush Week soon turned to an anxious complication, because of the growing concern about acceptance as a minority in this counsel. Online sources such as YouTube and Instagram were used as if I were writing a twenty-page research paper. After scrolling through social media accounts of the sorority chapters, I noticed that these organizations had recruited other African American women, which gave me hope that I had at least a 1 in 8 chance of being selected after the first round. Although I felt a sense of relief, there were several remaining pertinent perspectives that I had to reconcile with myself before being completely satisfied.

Weeks before my arrival for Rush Week, I received a direct message on Instagram from another African American girl who would be attending the university as a freshman. After much small talk about sorority organizations on campus, she got right down to the question I suspected she wanted to know from the beginning: "Are you going to join an African American sorority, or a Caucasian sorority?" Immediately, I was perplexed on how I would be able to answer her very direct question. As if I were trying to avoid an awkward encounter, I used evasive maneuvers to answer her question.

I hesitantly told her, "Um...I haven't decided." After sitting in solitude and intense thought, I began to question my own choice of rushing Panhellenic instead of National Pan-Hellenic organizations. The National Pan-Hellenic groups included nine African American fraternities and sororities whereas the Panhellenic organization was the overarching group made up of 26 historically or predominantly Caucasian

sororities. *Do I follow the path expected of me as an African American woman in Greek life, or do I align myself with an organization for many reasons other than race?* The answer is rather complicated.

The second perspective that I needed to consider was, *What was so appealing about the Panhellenic organization?* The answer to this question is rather simple. I looked beyond race and saw videos of sorority sisters visiting other countries and participating in study abroad programs. I saw girls participating and competing in intramural sports. Most of all, I saw a group of young women with many different values coming together for a common goal.

After much soul-searching, I was able to answer my own complicated question: *Do I follow the path of what is expected of me as an African American woman in Greek life?* At that point, I came to the realization that nobody wants to be a stereotype, and selecting a sorority simply based on the color of my skin would be stereotyping myself. My identity is based on more than just the color of my skin. I'm a cheerleader, I'm athletic, and I like to compete. I love the idea of traveling the world and studying abroad, and doing it with people whom I choose to be around and have chosen to be around me. I like having a variety of options for community service organizations. I knew my decision had to be about who I am rather than who I'm expected to be.

On Saturday morning, I woke with exhilaration to prepare for this big day. I prepared for the southern heat by carrying two tiny battery-operated fans. It was 9:00 am, and the humidity was already so thick, it was almost suffocating. In the midst of my racing thoughts, I tried to distract myself from the anxiety I had felt on the way to my first rush party. I looked up at the blue sky, and tried to tune out the chatter of other girls around me. I remember the scent of the freshly cut grass as I walked along the sidewalk, but mostly, I could feel the energy of the day. Manicured nails: check; makeup: check; oil absorbing wipes for my melting face: check; cute shoes: check; confidence and open mind: ready!

As if on a mission, I walked with my Pi Chi group to one of eight houses that I would visit

on the first day of Rush Week. We were nearly seconds away from our destination when the aching pain in my feet grew as I had walked swiftly in my tan-colored high heels. The elegant Victorian home looked as if it were professionally decorated. Each table setting was purposefully placed in designated areas around the house. As I reached the threshold of the door, I was welcomed with songs sung by the sorority members. I was quickly guided to my assigned table where a fresh glass of pink lemonade was served. Moments after recollecting my mother's words of advice, I found myself sitting in the first sorority house face-to-face with the interviewer.

A well-dressed brunette greeted me with a warm welcoming smile. As I visited each house, the feeling of uneasiness about being prejudged based on race disappeared. The girls of each sorority were intently listening and answering my questions. We were engaged in each other's responses, and I felt a sense of comfort. After each day of Rush, I was invited back to the maximum number of chapters which made me realize that the girls in the sorority houses saw my identity as a person and what I could contribute to the organization rather than the color of my skin.

There were three additional days of recruitment, each day visiting only the houses where invitations were received. For me, it was six, then four, then two houses that I visited on each subsequent day. After much anticipation, the final selection day, Bid Day, had finally arrived. This signifies the last day of recruitment, where potential new members receive bids to join chapters and become new members. On that Wednesday morning, fewer than 500 girls waited to hear what sorority house they would be invited to join. Some girls had not received bids from the houses of their choice which resulted in some tearful faces. Although I had so many positive experiences at many of the houses there were two very memorable ones, and one where I could envision myself truly belonging.

I remember receiving a large yellow envelope which held my bid. I anxiously awaited, with my mother attentively listening on the phone, as our group leader counted down from ten to one in the megaphone. Several hundred girls,

including myself, simultaneously ripped open our envelopes, and screamed with excitement as we found our new home. I quickly ran out to my new sorority where I was swarmed with hugs from all of the girls in the chapter. I knew at that moment that my identity didn't always have to align with the color of my skin, but it always had to align with my passions, comfort, and my sense of home.



Contributor Bio

Originally from Duluth, Georgia, Gabrielle Weaver is currently a junior at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Biomedical Engineering. Gabrielle is a member of the Kappa Chapter of Phi Mu Fraternity. Other extracurricular activities have included involvement in Allstar Cheerleading, and seven years as a violinist in orchestra. Her interest in Greek life has been a focal point of her first year as a college student, and has shaped her desire to stay involved as a leader in her community.

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