

Emily



I remember once, in a class, we were talking about gang members. My friend was mocking them, and I told him gang members are people, and not everyone is as bad as their label. I talked to him about it, and he finally said, 'I never knew there was another side to that story.'

My name is Emily. I live in Hemet, but I was born and raised in south-central Los Angeles. And, well, I guess I'm still trying to find out who I am.

When people meet me, they don't think of me as coming from a gang-related family. They think that I come from maybe a two-parent home, or something. But, it was my grandparents who raised me. My mom and dad were both gang members, and they weren't around very much.

Growing up, everyone was telling me that I was going to be just like my parents - that I was either going to end up being a gang member, or get pregnant and drop out of high school. But for my grandma, education is like a number one priority. Because of her, I felt like I had to prove everyone wrong.

I was always a 4.0, straight A student in high school. And I was actually the first one who made it to college in my family. I do have a Bachelor's Degree from Cal State LA. And now my younger cousins and my sisters and my neighbors are going to college. It feels really good to be that role model for them.

When I was applying for college one of my cousins called and told me to look into the Indian Trust Settlement Act. And I asked her, "Why would I do that?" She said that I should apply because we're Native American. That's when I first found out that I was Native. I grew up thinking I was only Mexican, because both my grandparents were from Mexico.

Last year I started doing my research and I found the Bureau of Indian Affairs letters saying that the application of my great-great grandmother was accepted. I found information about her parents, and I found out that her mother had a twin, and that it was her grandparents who were the half-blooded ones.

It turns out that I'm a Cahuilla descendent. And I identify as Cahuilla now. So, out in Hemet I started going to Cahuilla events, and I started meeting people, and I started getting involved. I bird sing and I bird dance now, and I have been studying the language for a couple of years.

Some people still don't accept me as Cahuilla. They don't know who my family is. I guess that's where something's missing - where my ancestry exactly comes

“This tassel does not represent me, but it represents my life story. I was told I’d be a good for nothing in life, but I was able to prove them wrong. The tassel serves as a reminder and motivation to keep me going in life.”



Tassel worn by Emily at her college graduation.

from. I know my tribe, but I don't know which clan. I hit a dead-end and I don't know how to get around it. When people ask, “Where are you from?” I do tell them that I grew up, you know, in Los Angeles. But that's the only thing I can tell them, and that's not where my people came from.

For me, I would get a lot of fulfillment in saying, “I know where I come from,” though in the eyes of some other people I'm so mixed it doesn't matter.

I will never be fully accepted by them, because of my DNA. I even had one friend – well, we're not friends anymore – who told me that I was Mexican, I was a beaner, and that I shouldn't be involved in the culture. He was telling me I wasn't really Native American.

Some people have strong beliefs toward other people, and you just can't convince them to change. Not unless you're speaking to someone who's open minded. Then, you know, you can share personal experiences, or you can talk to them and they will be able to see another side of the story.

I've come to a point where it doesn't matter to me what other people think, because I'm getting to know who I am. I'm just still trying to find that one missing part so I'll be able to say, “I might not be full blooded, but this is who my family is.”

I did the Peace and Dignity Run this year. I didn't think I could do it, but my friends pushed me into doing it. I thought I wasn't going to be able to make it but I applied myself, and I did it. I accomplished it. And now I know I can do it. So, that's kind of what I'm doing now. I'm trying it before I tell myself I can't. I've convinced myself to just, you know, do what I want to do.