

“Kannst du Streichholzschächtelchen sagen?” (Can you say little match box?) Whenever Germans figure out I was born in the US, even though my family is from Germany and I’ve been speaking German to them this whole conversation, they always ask me if I can say that word. I then feel the need to prove I can, fearing that if I mess up they won’t accept me. This constant testing of my identity is not limited to Germans around me, but Americans also question me.

I love history with a particular fascination for the World Wars. In the past, when I shared this passion with others, they’d ask me if it was because my family were Nazis. Hearing these comments would leave me speechless. I was not German enough for Germans, but I was not American enough for Americans. It led me to believe that people might never fully accept me unless I conformed to their expectations.

A turning point came when I was nominated for the Ambassadors program at my school, which is dedicated to promoting inclusivity and wellness, particularly for marginalized communities and diverse cultures.

On the first day of presentations, an upperclassman named Ryan walked up confidently to the front of the class, shared his favorite personal memories and bravely revealed that he was gay. His courage inspired me to speak up and be open about myself, especially because of the way the audience reacted and gave their support.

From that day on, I set out to become more open and willing to show my inner thoughts. I discovered the power of sharing my story and listening to others. In Ambassadors, we focused on a different leadership skill. One of those skills was active listening. I learned how to listen to people's stories and to know when to interrupt and ask questions.

These lessons helped me learn what it takes to actively listen to someone. I had the opportunity to put it into practice when I spent quality one-on-one time with a new friend, engaging in hours of meaningful conversation. We started off with small talk, such as “What’s your favorite subject?” By the end of the night, our connection kept getting stronger and we talked about deeper issues related to our mental health. She confided in me, expressing she had never shared such personal details with anyone before. She said that I made her feel comfortable to tell me anything. Our connection was far deeper than any connection I’d made with anyone before.

Hearing her story and knowing that I was the only one who knew, made me feel like I had discovered something important. I made it my mission to listen to other people's stories and use them to spread awareness of their experiences. Over the past two years, I’ve worked on this mission, speaking more vulnerably and connecting with people on a deeper level.

When the time came for Ambassadors presentations this year, I chose to go first. I aimed to encourage someone else to break out of their shell, much like Ryan had done for me. Walking up to the front of the classroom it felt powerful to be the one who brought the change instead of being the one who watched the change happen. It made me feel like I actually had a purpose and made me realize how much I had grown as an individual in the past few years in my proactivity and vulnerability. I am confident I will continue to grow in the future.

On my more recent visits to Germany, I shifted my focus away from meeting people's expectations and instead I prioritized forging deeper connections with them. Last summer, I was surprised that engaging in more authentic conversations, like mental health and our various experiences in our different countries, led to more meaningful conversations compared to when I had been trying to please everyone around me.