Personal Essay
By Rye Donaldson

      I was happily molding my clay, legs dangling from the stools in the art room one morning, when I heard a giggle to my left. Glancing up, I was met with the amused eyes of a classmate. My eyes shot back down to my ceramics project as I felt heat rush to my cheeks. I was suddenly aware of the little sound effects I made to go along with my work, my vocal stims. I felt hot and sweaty and out of place. I laughed along, but I was careful from then on. I was careful after the time a classmate avoided sitting with us, because I guess I missed some social cues. I was careful after a nonbinary guest speaker gave a talk at school, and I overheard a few girls in the bathroom snickering to each other, mocking whispers echoing off the tiled walls. *Did you hear them? The way they talked, it was so… And who dresses like that? They're so weird!*

      I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. Weird? Why? Where was the manual, the instruction page, the sheet of rules they seemed to have handed out to everyone else at middle school orientation but me? There were so many new social expectations, and I didn't understand any of them. I was constantly observing, worrying, and questioning myself. I collected all the pieces of myself that didn't fit, sealed them behind plaster walls, hid them under couch cushions, and then guarded them with my life. Because they were still there, waiting, threatening to expose me, the imposter, the one who doesn't understand.

      I was completely drained by the time I got home, staring distantly at my "45-minute" math assignment, tears threatening to blur my eyes as my brain refused to cooperate. *Just do it*, I told myself. *It's not that hard, stop being so lazy. Just focus.* It was dinner time when I messily boxed the final answer. I had thought I would draw when I finished, or write a story for a comic, or work on a coding project with my mom. But the thought of that made my head hurt.

      The pandemic made almost everything exponentially harder. School was zoom classes for hours on end. I was stuck in my room all day, and trying to concentrate felt impossible.

      Still, I was away from my peers, away from the judgment that pressured me to hide so much of myself, and that was liberating. I hesitantly gathered the pieces of myself hidden under the couch cushions, setting them on the coffee table instead. Among the familiar, I discovered pieces of myself I had never known existed. Happening upon some online videos made me realize I was genderqueer, and years of discomfort in my body made so much more sense. I slowly stopped suppressing my physical and vocal stims, too. The privacy from prying eyes let me begin to unravel what I had learned.

      When I finally came back to school in person, I had transitioned to my local public high school. I was able to be around childhood friends who I was comfortable with, friends that celebrated self-expression and who I could trust loved me. I finally got an ADHD diagnosis, which allowed me to stop being so harsh on myself and get accommodations to help me learn better.

      As I've become more comfortable with myself I've started more seriously writing stories about queer identity and being neurodivergent. Through my written and animated documentary

on issues with neurodivergent education, I learned a lot about how I and other students learn while working towards social and systemic change. I want to combine my passions for writing, coding, and art to develop video games that tell these often untold or misunderstood stories, so that kids like me, kids who don't understand why the world doesn't understand them, don't feel so out of place.