Teacher’s Snap Judgement Opens Young Girl’s Eyes to Prejudice

“Your English is not good enough to be in my class.”

Sneha Rao was understandably confused. How could the teacher leap to that conclusion based on the simple, “Good morning, madam” Sneha had greeted her with on that first day of high school in a new country? Not to mention the fact that back in India she was introduced to the language in kindergarten and had been a member of her school’s English debate team.

Sneha wasn’t naïve. Before arriving in Australia, she was well aware that people made judgments based on how you looked. “When I was growing up people would say I was too fair skinned to be a south Indian, where people are typically darker than northern Indians.” But she took the comments in stride. “I didn’t really think about them. They just seemed normal to me.”

It wasn’t until she heard the discouraging words from her Advanced English teacher, less than 24 hours after landing in Australia, that Sneha felt different for the first time in her life.

What’s in a Name

Things worked out – to a degree. She was admitted to the class after her father talked to the head of the English department and she passed a comprehension exam to prove her proficiency in English.

“I got an A+,” she laughs, “but because of the experience I moved from being a confident, talkative child to being a quiet and doubtful student.”

Sneha says she accepted the fact she’d never truly be a typical Australian, so her choice was to pretend to be one or be her authentic self. She chose the latter.

“A lot of ethnic people change their name to assimilate,” she says. “I’ll never do that. I’m proud of what my name signifies in me. Besides, why should I change my name in Australia when a Christopher who goes to work in India remains Christopher?”
Wishing a Happy Diwali

Sneha has done a lot of thinking about diversity and inclusion. She’s acted, too, like founding the Asians at Microsoft Australia Employee Resource Group in February 2021, extending it to include New Zealand five months later.

“To be very honest, diversity to many employers is marking attendance,” she says. “Do we have people of different colors and cultural backgrounds? Of course, we do. But do they feel included? Do they feel a sense of belonging? That’s a different topic all together.”

She suggests a sense of belonging can be fostered through the smallest actions in your daily life.

“A Muslim or Hindu friend might wish you a Merry Christmas, but how many would think of wishing them a happy Diwali?” she asks. “And how many companies wouldn’t think of scheduling a Board meeting on Christmas Day but have no hesitancy to do so around Diwali or Chinese New Year?”

“When cultural awareness such as that becomes normal is when you’ll know you’ve achieved true inclusion.”

There’s much more to Sneha’s story, including a touching conversation she had with her youngest daughter, Samhita, who asked how she could become fair skinned like her mother. You can check it out on the Powered By The People podcast with Sneha.