

Lifting the mask

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2026 Youth Summit speaker

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, *'a nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people,'* and thus it is my mission to help others lift their mask and express their true selves.

Γεια σου! Είμαι η Μαρία – Hi, I'm Maria and as a Year 12 student, I aspire to become a family lawyer, specialising in adoptions and custodies, hoping to provide young children with the means to live their best lives. As the school year continues, I'm striving to build initiatives and join programs that help others live life to its fullest. The idea that we only get one chance at life motivates me every day, to create a society where we can all honestly say that we've had a life well lived.

Growing up, in my Brisbane home, I was pretty lucky. My dad was the sole provider for my family, and my mum stayed home, cooking, cleaning and looking after me and my siblings. I felt safe and secure, but it also clouded my judgement to see that life could be pretty cruel sometimes, slowly over time I noticed I had been a victim of cultural discrimination.

I stood there, presenting in front of the class. But instead of listening and engaging, they sat there and spoke, fingers rising, pointing right at me. They giggled and laughed. Hiding behind their hands, thinking I couldn't see them. Little did they know I could see everything, and as the seconds passed, my desire to continue sharing very much decreased. But I had to ask myself, was I gonna let their immaturity step in the way of what I love?

Come 2024–2025, my experiences in social justice clubs, and both the Vinnies OLP program and Buddies Days, have provided me with a new sense of awareness of just some of life's hardships, and while mine will never compare, I have been inspired to focus more of my time in advocacy and social justice work. These programs have given me a new outlook on life and provided me with a sense of deep gratitude and thankfulness. As I continue into my teenage years, I have now found a purpose, one I'm excited to further explore.

My lived experience was shaped by the morals and values taught to me at such a young age, and has influenced my outlook on life, and my eagerness to serve. Growing up in a Greek Orthodox home, we prioritised upholding our traditions and customs and embedded them into our daily lives. For example, Church, Sunday school, Bible Study and even Red Eggs at Easter.

Accordingly, I felt this same sense of security when I participated in other community events, often witnessing and experiencing how love, passion and teamwork can create something wonderful. A core memory is centred at the Panayiri Festival, where together, the Greek Community present our culture and tradition, making thousands of honey puffs for all!

I want you all to close your eyes. Imagine a big park filled with stalls, rides, and games for all. As you walk past the food tents, the smell of souvla weakens you to the knees. The sight of smoke coming from the coals. And the glimpse of memories you see from your yiayia's stories of her home town.

Yes, witnessing this was a blessing, but I realised that I only felt comfortable to share my honest self, someone shaped so heavily by my culture, in events and situations with 'my own people'. I realised that I haven't felt welcomed in the 'big wide world', often forcing myself to close up and hide my true self and identity, hiding from discrimination, in fear of being segregated. There have been times where I have felt small and embarrassed when people have openly laughed and shown disgust at my traditions and customs. Imagine starting high school and being so excited to be able to share your culture with so many more people? Being so enthusiastic and keen to share your true authentic self. But the minute you begin, they laugh. They smirk. They ridicule. And never again do you want to step out of your shell, and show who you truly are.

In the past couple of years, we have created so many positive things around our areas to foster a safe and welcoming sense of community for people to share their culture and heritage. In schools and workplaces we celebrate Harmony Day and have increased our multicultural education. We have a range of NAIDOC week

celebrations around Brisbane and receive assistance from sector leads and authorities. However, we need to be doing more...Guest speakers at schools, little free libraries (cultural edition) and multicultural weeks in all cities. These small initiatives will create a safer and stronger sense of community for all.

At the end of the day, identity and culture are so pivotal and influence how our lives are shaped and carried out. It's our homeland, our customs and lifelong traditions that shape us into the people we are.

Don't you want a place where you can be authentically you? Where you can openly share about yourself? Where differences are valued and encouraged? Imagine a world where this is possible. Where we don't face discrimination or segregation.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to make a change. We need to be open to others and accept them for who they are. We need to ask and listen, and genuinely be interested in the cultures of others. So the next time someone is sharing about their culture and identity, actually take the time to listen and appreciate them. This is who they are. Their culture and identity. Because as Ghandi once said, *'a nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.'*