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You Define Yourself

Muslim. Terrorist. Muslim. Terrorist. The words I was born to hear for the past 17 years and counting. However, do they define me?

Mexicans. Drug dealers. Black. Rapist. White. Racist. Does it define you?

We've all been labeled once in our lives, whether it was because of our race, religion, or physical appearance. These words of hatred have taken over our society and have divided us, however, what if I were to tell you that there is a culprit behind this hatred? Luckily for us, the culprit is within this room. It's us, but more specifically, it's you. We spend too much time victimizing ourselves without realizing that we are a part of the problem. Believe it or not, the everyday comments we make are considered labels. Whether it's commenting on someone's views or their appearances, we're part of this never-ending cycle of prejudice.

However, the question is what can we do to address the negative impact of labeling and the answers are quite simple. First, end the habit of labeling by realizing the effect it has on you. Consider being labeled something as simple as a 'liar.' Although, you know it's not true, imagine being constantly introduced and viewed as a 'liar' and being treated differently because of the label someone put on you. Now switch that thought around. Once you notice yourself inappropriately label someone, refer back to the 'liar' concept, understanding the effect of labeling will make it easier to avoid labeling others in the future.

Just as important, acknowledge that a person is more than just a label. It's true that I'm a Muslim. But I'm not just any Muslim, I'm a basketball playing journalist who has led a rally against gun violence, who has co-founded the first student-led bilingual school newspaper in California and who enjoys annoying her older siblings on her free time. This defines me. When we limit ourselves to the labels we put on people, we will never fully grasp the beauty of being able to communicate with different people and exchange certain views and beliefs. We'll try to live our lives being restricted by the boundaries of the certain standards we have to meet. Don't live by the labels someone gives you, as Philip Pullman once said, "People are too complicated to have simple labels." Labels don't define you... you define yourself.