

ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES EPITOMIZE FEMININITY

INTERPRETING TRADITIONAL NOTIONS

Woman Allah Niqab Muslim



Being a woman, for sociology major Rayah Alammari, means being powerful. Alammari said being a Muslim woman in the U.S. has empowered her because she is free to practice her religion on her terms.

For Alammari, Allah (God) is part of her everyday life. She said Allah is one, but has many names that describe different attributes of Allah's divinity.

Alammari said wearing the Niqab allows her to walk confidently and feel more spiritual in her daily life. It also removes any standard of beauty imposed by society.

To be a Muslim in the U.S. can have its hardships because of negative connotations toward the religion. Islam teaches forgiveness and creating positive change through caring actions.

Rayah Alammari wears a Niqab by choice every day as part of her devotion to the Islamic faith.

DENIS PEREZ / THE ADVOCATE

Leader manifests solidarity through religious awareness

By Michael Santone
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
msantone.theadvocate@gmail.com

It can feel as if the world has been placed on your shoulders when navigating life in a country that labels you, your culture and your religion as the enemy.

When being constantly bombarded by distorted notions that portray your innate way of living as dangerous or evil, one's very existence becomes etched into the lexicon of American politics.

For Contra Costa College Muslim Student Association President Rayah Alammari, these misconstrued perceptions have only instilled a deeper passion for breaking the learned stereotypes of what defines a Muslim.

"It can be tough hearing or seeing negative comments and images telling you who you are on a daily basis," Alammari said with the look of determination in her dark brown eyes.

"I'm trying my best to show people that we aren't who they are making us out to be. If I can change one (person's) misconception — I'm happy."

Born in Yemen, one of the poorest countries bordering the Arabian Peninsula, Alammari was raised following the teachings of Islam in a collectivist society. It is characterized by continuous prayer, the practice of fasting and the use of hijabs and niqabs by women.

"It's about everyone, it's not just about you," she said. "Coming from this culture and society has better equipped me with a path to help humanity."

At a young age, her parents placed a strong emphasis on religion and education as well as the importance of individuality.

In 2002, when she was 4 years old, Alammari's parents made the decision to move her, along with her sister and two older brothers, to the United States.

"My father wanted nothing but the best for us," she said. "He has been our strongest support system and wanted my siblings and I to worry only about our education."

But adjusting to post 9/11 America came with its own set of obstacles as the clash of cultural differences took shape in a country at war with the Muslim community — a country Alammari now called home.

"I was put in this weird place where American society sees the way I dress and the religion I practice and thinks I'm weak or oppressed," Alammari said. "It took time and it was a struggle to figure out the middle ground between the two different cultures."

Graduating one year early in 2015 from Vista High School in Richmond, Alammari and her family planned to travel to Yemen, but the Yemeni civil war broke out.

With hopes of being reunited with extended family and old friends dashed, Alammari registered for fall classes at CCC to begin work toward a sociology degree.

"I love my culture and I love my people, don't get me wrong, but I see a lack of help in the mental health field," she said.

Biological science major Sina Alkrizy said, "Rayah's (Alammari) integrity and self-motivating attitude really draws people toward her," she said. "When I first met her I was inspired by how serious she was about her education and her passion for improving society as a whole."

Having known Alammari for three years, Alkrizy said it's Alammari's faith that gives her the strength to express herself.

"When she chose to first wear the face veil my perception of her changed," Alkrizy said. "She's pushing to be herself and at the same time she is removing stereotypes associated with the niqab. That is admirable and shows she has a unique mindset for progress."

Like the hijab, which is a head covering worn in public by Muslim women, the niqab adds a face veil, exposing only the eyes. Alammari began wearing the niqab a few months before attending CCC.

"I started wearing it because I wanted to, because I felt more confident with the way I looked," she said. "I want the conversation to be productive and for people to look in my

"I was put in this weird place where American society sees the way I dress and the religion I practice and think I'm weak or oppressed."

Rayah Alammari
sociology major

eyes and understand what's going on in my head."

But with stigmas already attached to the Muslim lifestyle, the stares and comments that come with wearing a niqab only added insult to injury.

"When I'm out in public people ask me where my husband is and why he is making me dress like this. I'm told that I'm oppressed and that this is America.

"I know it's their own ignorance and they will figure it out on their own," Alammari said. "But I'm thankful when people come up and ask me questions. I want to be able to give them the real reason behind what I'm wearing and who I worship."

Long time friend and CCC nursing major Sarabjot Kaur said Alammari is very passionate about helping students as an English and biology tutor.

"Rayah's definition of perfection is giving all that she can, in everything that she is doing," Kaur said. "She has very good time management skills and is able to help students and her family." Although Alammari looks a little different from other students on campus, she is able to walk with an aura of confidence.

"Whenever she is faced with any racism or discrimination she is able to talk to them (the offender) about the issues and come out with a new friend," Kaur said. "She doesn't let the bad energy get her down. She's able to face adversity and stay strong."

For Alammari, CCC has been a safe haven filled with a diverse mix of faculty, staff and students who are able to see past the misconceptions that plague her community.

"I expected to wear the niqab and be stared at or teased, but people walk by as if it's nothing and it feels good," Alammari said. "It's refreshing. I don't know how I would feel about it at any other college."

Since Donald Trump was sworn in as president on Jan. 20, his enhanced assault on the Muslim community has sent tremors of uncertainty across the CCC student body.

Alammari said the outcome had a ripple effect on her as well as other students on campus. "For me, it hurt my ability to walk confidently and not have fear," she said. "With the multiple travel bans affecting my country and the portrayal of Muslims in the media, it's really hard."

Alammari said this is only a bump in the road, but it's an addition to an already turbulent ride.

"How do you stay strong when family members call you freaking out — what do you say?" she asked. "How do you stay strong for the people around you?"

For many Muslim students on campus, the light at the end of the tunnel has been the Muslim Student Association, a club regrouped by Alammari during last semester.

Providing reassurance and solace, the MSA has flourished with Alammari at the helm of the organization.

"There is such a strong Muslim presence on campus, I figured we could do something great," Alammari said. "As a group, we work together to change the misconceptions of Islam."

Unafraid to show weakness, and too strong to allow it to defeat her, Alammari has prompted awareness throughout many facets of student life.

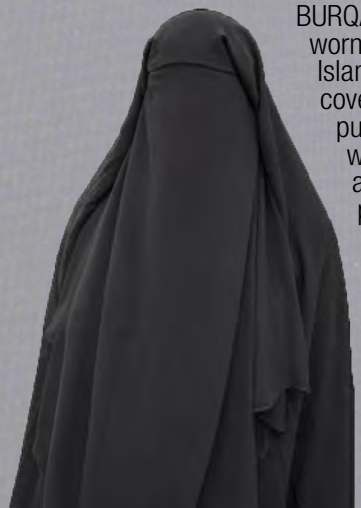
Cultivating ideas like the Interfaith Meditation Room and holding events such as the fast-a-thon, her devotion to dispelling the negative notions of Islam have been brazen, but needed.

For many who admire Alammari, it is not her brazen feats that leave a lasting impression, but her leadership to begin a movement during a convoluted time.

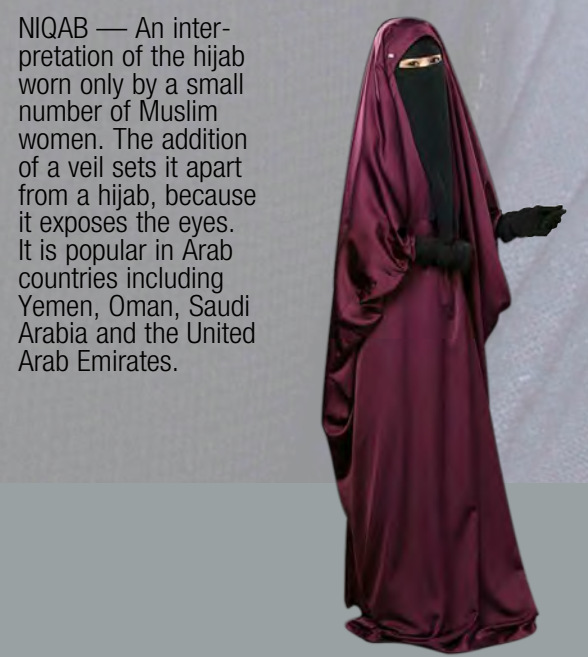
Diverse Muslim traditional dresswear



HIJAB — A scarf worn by women in the presence of adult men outside of their family. Hijab in the Quran refers to a partition or curtain. It is characterized by the complete covering of everything except hands, feet and face. Women who wear a hijab are called Muhaajaba.



BURQA — A garment worn by women in many Islamic traditions to cover themselves in public. Commonly worn in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is popular among the more conservative factions of the Muslim community.



NIQAB — An interpretation of the hijab worn only by a small number of Muslim women. The addition of a veil sets it apart from a hijab, because it exposes the eyes. It is popular in Arab countries including Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.



CHADOR — An outer garment that is wrapped around the head and is closed in the front. It is popular among women in Iran. Black is normally worn in public, but a variety of colors can be worn at home or at a mosque.

Photo Illustration by Denis Perez / The Advocate



LEFT: Nursing major Gianna Serrano, formerly known as Bryan Serrano, touches up her eye shadow on Friday. Serrano has been transitioning from a gay cis man to a transgender woman since 2016.

DENIS PEREZ / THE ADVOCATE

Despite prejudice transwoman shines

By Anthony Kinney

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
akinney.theadvocate@gmail.com

In a world where being different is often discouraged and mocked, people lose themselves trying to fit in with society's perception of "normal" in fear of being scorned by family members and peers.

Some fight to ignore the mainstream's daunting impression of what "normal" is to only find themselves bullied and shunned by society as weird or an outcast.

However, a few are born to boldly question and change society's idea of "what is normal."

Gianna Serrano unapologetically prides herself as one of those people.

Though given the name Bryan Serrano at birth, she feels that name never suited the person she was, or the gender with which she now identifies.

"When I hear that name I think, 'that was me once before, but not anymore,'" Serrano said proudly with a gleeful smile, a smile brought forth from a confidence she only recently discovered since she began the transition two years ago from a gay cis (birth gender) man into a transgender woman.

"No one knows me as that anymore."

Serrano grew an interest in drag shows and as a man would occasionally dress as a woman at shows. But she felt the dramatization of a man portraying a woman didn't quite fit.

"I never felt like I was a drag queen," Serrano said. "I felt the exaggeration of a man dressing like a woman was not me. For me, it felt more natural."

During her time participating in drag shows she found and adopted her new name and fell in love with her new identity, Gianna Serrano.

"Until I graduated high school I felt as if my body belonged to my parents," Serrano said.

Now, at age 24, looking back in time, Serrano feels if her parents were more accepting of her situation earlier on, she would have started her transition sooner.

"I just got to a point where I felt like 'this is my life, and this is how I want to live it. No one will stop me,'" she said.

She said her parents were never disappointed in her for her deci-

sion to transition, just worried about the dehumanizing attacks that often plague the LGBTQ community.

"I feel they believed in the misconception that if you're gay, you're weak. If you're weak, you're more prone to violence, which isn't always the case," Serrano said. "You hear stories about how people assault folks from the LGBTQ community and no doubt, that's scary. But I think it's also about the situations you put yourself in, you know?"

The medical regimen she utilizes to prepare her body for the transition consists of taking testosterone-blocking prescription pills daily and a bi-weekly estrogen shot to regulate and maintain the female hormones in her body and to keep her body's production of testosterone at the lowest levels.

She plans on completing her transition by undergoing "sex reaffirming surgery" (SRS), the procedure to change the physical appearance and function of a person's sexual organs. In her case Serrano will endure "male to female reassignment surgery" which includes the removing of the testicles and inversion of the penis to create a replica vagina. These types of surgeries can cost patients between \$7,000 and \$24,000. For that reason, Serrano has been saving money for the operation since she made the decision to have it done two years ago.

Serrano said it's just another step into portraying the person she feels has been trapped inside her since as far back as she can remember.

Born in 1993 in Mexico City, Mexico, Serrano spent the earlier years of her life in Mexico under the care of her grandmother. At the age of 6 she accompanied her grandmother and brother on a trip to California to be reunited with her parents who journeyed there a few years prior.

Since she came to the U.S. at a young age, Serrano applied and was approved to receive DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) in 2012.

Once settled, Serrano began the third grade in Fairfield before moving with her parents to Albany.

With the insults gradually growing worse as she progressed through the grade levels, Serrano was a daily target of taunting and bullying.

Looked down upon and teased

"As a society we need to stop being so narrow-minded. We are all God's children. We have one life to live and the right to get it right. We should all be able to feel free to live the way we want."

Dr. Angela King-Jones
nursing professor

by other boys, Serrano preferred spending lunch with her girlfriends instead of trying to fit in with the guys.

Reminiscing on those days, she remembers being called words like gay, weird, soft and girly by boys who gained popularity by bullying her and others who they deemed eccentric.

"I didn't know what any of those terms meant at the time. I was just being myself," Serrano said.

And with English being her second language, the communication barrier prevented her from defending herself verbally in a language understood by her tormentors.

The mocking reached its peak in middle school as she experienced classmates and school yard bullies more heinous than in grades prior.

Before long she learned to ignore the hate of her bullies and focus on the reassuring love from friends.

Albany Middle school is also where Serrano met Brittany Curry. The two have been best friends since the eighth grade.

Curry has been present for all of Serrano's journey; from a straight cis male to a gay cis male, now into a transgender woman.

Curry said she fully supports her friend's decision to transition into a woman because she has noticed a sharp boost in Serrano's self-esteem due to finally feeling free as the gender with which she always identified.

Serrano decided to come out to her parents in the seventh grade. Initially shocked, they demanded she attend weekly group sessions geared toward troubled teens to determine if the changes she was

going through were just a phase in her young life.

"That made me feel like they were trying to change me," Serrano said. "At the time they were saying they accepted me, but I didn't feel as if they did."

However, she didn't let the lack of home support nor the bullying from peers impact her schooling. Serrano excelled in the classroom despite the mean-spirited taunting she received from judgmental classmates who considered her weird because of her feminine tendencies as a gay man.

As a Contra Costa College student since 2013, Serrano earned her associate degree in psychology in 2015 and began her transition while earning her certificate from CCC's medical assisting program.

She's currently taking nursing classes working toward her license to become a registered nurse.

Contrary to her dreadful experience throughout grade school, she's now accepted for who she is by her peers in the nursing department.

Nursing professor Angela King-Jones said Serrano is a wonderfully knowledgeable student who's always eager to learn and admired by her peers.

She said the students in the program are a close-knit group who all share an admiration for Serrano and her relentless strength to become the individual she longed to be, regardless of the disparaging criticism often slung her way from those who disfavor the LGBTQ lifestyle.

Dr. King-Jones said more importantly, her male peers address Serrano by the proper pronoun and the women accept her as one of their own.

"They do everything together like a family," King-Jones said. "She's just like any other female student I've had over the years. She shouldn't be treated any differently."

With her education she plans on becoming a nurse practitioner and opening her own clinic focusing on the mental health of children and teens.

"As a society we need to stop being so narrow-minded," King-Jones said. "We're all God's children."

"We all have one life to live and the right to get it right. We should all be able to feel free to live life the way we want."

Gianna's transition pack

Medication

Spironolactone testosterone blocker:
100 mg tablet two times a day.
\$75-85 prescription

Estrogen shots:
10 mg /2ml a day.
\$50-75 per prescription

Surgeries

Breast augmentation
\$6,000-\$10,000

Laser hair removal
\$60-150 per session

Facial feminization
\$5,000-\$20,000

Sex reassignment
\$25,000-\$35,000



■ “Many times, Latinos come to me struggling to speak English to me and when I speak back in Spanish they are surprised.”

— *Elias Ledezma, biology major*



■ “Every day I’m going to wake up black. Every day I’m going to wake up with dark skin and I can’t really base my life on how other people feel I am as a person.”

— *Joel Nickleson-Shanks, Student Life coordinator*



■ “Colorism is important because if you are darker, then you are labeled as less, automatically.”

— *Daniella Matute, business administration major*



■ “In my country (Vietnam) there is discrimination based on skin color because of income. When we come here, because we are a community of Asians, I think we bond easier. It’s friendlier — less discrimination.”

— *Pbuong Mai, art major*

■ “We need to get over the fact that we need to be segregated. It still exists. It’s not explicit but it’s there — I see it. We need to come together as a country and embrace each other and just mix it. Just like Brazil.”

— *Mariab Marinbo, architecture major*



■ “Because I’m light skinned people think I am sadiddy (stuck up). When people meet me and get to know me they say, ‘Oh, I thought you were one of those’ — until they actually hear me speak.”

— *Yakaira Daniels, African-American studies major*



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION ROXANA AMPARO, DENIS PEREZ / THE ADVOCATE

Snippets of shade

Skin-based biases cross cultural divides, foster discrimination within ethnic communities

By Rob Clinton
OPINION EDITOR
rcClinton.theadvocate@gmail.com

Dark things can be mysterious, intriguing, stunning or sleek. But when it comes to skin tone, across gender or geographical borders the sentiment more often than not is darker is less desirable.

Colorism, a term coined by author and activist Alice Walker in 1982, is a type of discrimination that highlights the way people are treated according to skin tone.

Despite the stark contrast between white and African-American skin in the U.S., the condition far outreaches American shores and permeates the boundaries of nearly every country in the world.

“It’s not just America,” Student Life Coordinator Joel Nickleson-Shanks said. “I travel a lot and in pretty much every country that I’ve been to people with darker skin get discriminated against. In America, I feel like it’s more of a way to pit black people against each other.”

“People always go back to the slave example of light people being in the house and black people being in the field, I think it’s way bigger than that. We tie a lot of beauty to being light skinned — sometimes it’s seen as being closer to white.”

This sentiment is easiest explained through the paper bag test.

Throughout white and many African-American organizations in the early 20th century, a brown paper bag was used to determine whether or not someone would receive privileges that only people with a skin tone lighter than a brown paper bag were afforded.

Since this country’s inception, whiteness has been a symbol of purity and beauty, but in countries that are devoid of Caucasians, what feeds the discriminatory beast that is colorism?

Computer science major Jagjot Saggar is from India and says the divisions there are mostly driven by geography and a lack of education and opportunity.

In India, lighter skinned people live in the northern part of the country, while darker people occupy the poorer south.

“Sometimes it can be dangerous for northerners to go to the south because of potential muggings,” he said. “But if the people are educated there is generally no problem. The areas are far apart. Here we don’t have the same divisions, mostly because of education. There are a lot of Indians in the medical field and the tech industry. Dark and light, the opportunity for advancement in the U.S. is the unifying bond.”

For some, the brown-bodied pursuit of a better life or higher education can be challenging to navigate, especially in a world of covert or passive discrimination.

“I take classes at Diablo Valley College (in Pleasant Hill) as well as here and I’m basically the only Latina in class,” business administration major Daniella Matute said. “When I walk the halls I can feel people just staring. I don’t know if it’s because of my color or because I’m a girl or because I’m tall.”

“I come from Nicaragua and there are a lot of dark people there. When I was a kid I didn’t know color. It wasn’t until I got here that it was an issue. Color is important here because if you are darker, then you are labeled as less than, automatically.”

With lighter Hispanics, acceptance can be fleeting because, in most cases, racial commonalities outweigh unification by pigmentation.

“It’s kind of a positive and a negative because with other people they see me as more trustworthy because I’m lighter and they talk to me more openly,” biology major Elias Ledezma said. “But when it comes to my fellow Latinos, they automatically assume that I can’t speak Spanish or that I know nothing about my culture.”

“Many times, Latinos come to me struggling to speak English to me and when I speak back in Spanish they are surprised.”

Ledezma said his family comes from Jalisco, Mexico where people have lighter skin. “I’m still pretty distinguishable because my facial features are Latino.”

“My dad told me that back home people

■ “Being tall, dark and male I find myself smiling a lot more to make other people feel comfortable. If I don’t, sometimes my regular resting face may make people feel uncomfortable. So I watch my mannerisms and my wording — a lot.”

— *Joel Nickleson-Shanks, Student Life coordinator*

with lighter skin were a little more arrogant. But here it doesn’t matter as much. It’s all about race. In Mexico, we are all Mexicans so it can’t be about race, only skin tone.”

For others, the path to acceptance can be tougher to navigate.

Sam Hernandez, who is studying to be an X-ray technician, said, “People see me and it’s like, oh no, because I’m brown.”

Hernandez said he gets mistaken for other races like Filipino or Indian, but when people learn that he is Mexican, because he’s brown, they assume that he only speaks Spanish and treat him differently.

In America, the lens in which people judge color can be the difference between opportunity and misfortune — even life and death.

“The whole light skin, dark skin thing offends me and it divides us as black people,” African-American studies major Yakaira Daniels said. “We are already separated from the world, so why separate us from ourselves. Why not stick together because everyone else is against us. Because I’m light skinned people think I’m sadiddy (stuck up). When people meet me and they get to know me they say, ‘Oh, I thought you were one of those’ — until they actually hear me speak.”

Nickleson-Shanks said colorism within racial groups is akin to being ashamed of who you are and a product of not knowing about your culture and history.

“I can’t be mad at people for being igno-

rant,” he said.

Brown Americans, black people in particular, shoulder the unfair burden of acquiescing to the insecurities of others to avoid unnecessary confrontations.

“Being tall, dark and male I find myself smiling a lot more to make other people feel comfortable. If I don’t, sometimes my regular resting face may make people feel uncomfortable. So I watch my mannerisms and my wording — a lot. You get used to it just like anything in life. It’s sad that it’s something that has to be accepted. But there are bigger issues that I want to address first.”

“Every day I’m going to wake up black. Every day I’m going to wake up with dark skin and I can’t really base my life on how other people feel I am as a person,” Nickleson-Shanks said.

Wealth and education inequities drive these divisions. However, some immigrant communities leave those divisions behind upon reaching the shores of the U.S.

“I don’t pay much attention to skin color. I don’t think there are any real differences,” art major Pbuong Mai said.

“In my country (Vietnam) there is discrimination based on skin color because people are darker, or because of income. When we come here, because we are a community of Asians, I think we bond easier. It’s friendlier — less discrimination.”

For some, like architecture major Mariah Marinbo, the widespread self-segregation that happens in America is at the root of colorism and racial discrimination.

“People either say I’m white or Hispanic, but I’m not. I’m Brazilian,” she said.

“Over there we’re mixed. We don’t have whites from Portugal or blacks from Africa. We’re all mixed, so we don’t see it the same there.”

“We need to get over the fact that we need to be segregated. It still exists. It’s not explicit but it’s there — I see it. We need to come together as a country and embrace each other and just mix it — just like Brazil.”

Embracing confidence, self-admiration

Issues surrounding body image, public perception permeate modern culture, distort notions of beauty

By Michael Santone
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
msantone.theadvocate@gmail.com

In today's society the definition of beauty has been warped by unattainably high standards and lies that spread false ideas of what constitutes the perfect outward appearance and what it means to be beautiful.

For those who struggle with the notion of the "perfect" physical features, such as height and weight, the challenges faced in building self-love can be a long and daunting process.

"When I was younger I was told by friends and family that I was too big to be a girl," 19-year-old psychology major Athena Estrada said. "This made me feel insecure, so I pushed myself to lose weight. But it was hard because I couldn't be their type of thin and I got frustrated."

Eating only one small meal a day, Estrada said she became really depressed and began wearing baggy clothes to hide her fat.

"I felt like I was competing with skinnier girls because they could wear whatever they wanted."

It wasn't until after she had her baby that she became comfortable with her body.

"I saw this really nice dress that I thought would only look good on skinny girls. But when I tried it on I looked beautiful and felt really comfortable," Estrada said.

"It took me a long time, but I love my body — It's unique. The stretch marks I got from my baby, I'm proud of them. I went through a lot to love my body."

According to DoSomething.org, only 5 percent of women naturally possess the body type often portrayed by Americans in the media.

Approximately 91 percent of women are unhappy with their body, with 40 percent considering plastic surgery in the future.

"Currently, I see all these people and I'm like 'Maybe I should be skinnier or look like that model,' but I just remember who I am," 18-year-old Middle College High School student Mikaela Pollard said. "In middle school I weighed more. I didn't feel pretty and the friends I had didn't think I was pretty."

Pollard, who is biracial, said people use the cliché of the black girl, big butt perception but because she's mixed with Indonesian, she isn't "manufactured" like that.

"I had a butt but that's because I was fat. Me being me, I was like 'whatever, flat butt,' she said. "It took me a while to say 'hey, I'm not that bad.' You just have to be confident and nurture yourself with things that make you feel beautiful."

But the struggles people have with body image don't begin or end with women.

Men, often portrayed as anything but body conscious within mainstream culture, are oftentimes disregarded when it comes to body image.

"I've always been the fat kid and struggled all the way through high school. I hated the way I looked," 23-year-old theater arts design and technology major Cody Poehnelt said. "I thought no one looked at me like they look at other people and I began to see myself like other people saw me, like 'man I must be ugly.'"

After having a mental breakdown and almost attempting suicide, Poehnelt said that's when his perception of himself changed.

"I was tired of feeling like crap and started living with my own body standards," he said. "I don't let anyone else's expectations of me control my life. I'm comfortable with myself. I am who I am and if someone doesn't like it, that's their problem."

Being a man with body image issues seems to carry a label of frailty that spurs judgment amid society when brought to the public.

But for those who already experience a world of discrimination due to skin color or sexual orientation, the stigmas that come along with body image only elevate the pressures and struggles of everyday life.

Nineteen-year-old Gateway to College student Aireus Robinson said he was bullied extensively because he wasn't black enough.

"I was a skinny short black kid and I didn't play sports. Everyone would tell me to eat more, to the point where I would spend all my money on food," he said. "I used to really hate how my knees looked, so I didn't wear shorts much and when I did they were long, like cargo shorts."

Hollywood movies portray high school stereotypes perfectly, Robinson said, because of the stressed social bubble that is constructed of clichés.

"It's a place where you grow and encounter social problems that can shape you as a person," he said. "But I began doing things that made me comfortable in my own skin. I just started to love myself and it grew. I began accepting myself and doing what pleased me and not everyone else."

The struggle with body image can consist of many different layers of insecurities that affect members of society in a variety of ways.

"I was a skinny black kid who didn't play sports. Everyone told me that I should eat more."

— Aireus Robinson, Gateway to College student

Business major Jeremiah Sayson said, throughout his life, height has been the root of many struggles that has guided him into his love of fashion.

"I would be looked at as weaker because I was short. It would make me jealous of guys who were taller than me and I would put up a guard that really played a factor," Sayson said. "I found my confidence in shoes. I really just used that as something to boost my ego. That helped me develop passion and the mindset to not care what people think."

Societal beauty standards and what is deemed as "perfect" can go beyond that of weight and height and into more physical judgments.

Like the elevated nature of body image for those already facing adversities, multiple social "imperfections" only add to the burden of self-love.

Twenty-eight-year-old drama major Irena Miles said she's not only curvy but she was also born with lazy eyes that elicited teasing since the moment she was born.

"These both come with their own sets of challenges. When you are different you can feel it, but then you start to appreciate it," she said. "When I was younger I would try to mimic what other girls were wearing, but it was not until my late 20s that I began to realize that what I thought about myself is all that mattered."

Working in customer service, Miles said she still encounters people who stare or make comments about her appearance.

"I'm human, so sometimes it affects me and I go cry or vent to my friends," she said. "But then I remind myself of who I am, people love me and my opinion is the only one that matters."



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DENIS PEREZ AND ROXANA AMPARO / THE ADVOCATE