

Adopting an identity

BY BIANCA CEGATTE

Her long, black hair hits right below her hip, accentuating her golden brown skin. Dark eyes peer through almond-shaped lids and sparkle when she laughs. She's too short to reach the top shelf, but stern enough that she won't be overlooked.

Although she doesn't look like it, junior Rachel Nieland says she's a "basic white chick."

Nieland was born in Kunming, China, in the Yunnan Province. But, shortly after she was born, Nieland was introduced to her home on the other side of the world – Chicago.

"I was adopted and I was brought here at 9 months old," she

"I THINK, IN TERMS OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION, IT ISN'T SO MUCH WHO YOU WERE BUT WHO YOU ARE."

said. "I remember when I was young I would get a lot of comments. Other kids my age, in my class, would say, 'You can't be their daughter; you don't look like them.' Things like that because they didn't understand adoption."

Since then, Nieland's family has moved to Florida, where she spends her days rowing crew and her nights listening to Panic! At the Disco. Her first and only language is English and her love for Starbucks is as great as the next girl. She's Chinese, but that doesn't make her any less American than her parents.

Adopted children may struggle more intensely with their identity than other adolescents, wondering how they fit in with their family, their peers and the rest of the world, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Some kids undergo a cultural identity crisis. Some grow out of it and others try and find a balance between their biological and adopted identity. Nieland never did; she simply always knew.

"I am a Chinese-born female [who] is greatly influenced by white culture and barely influenced by my own biological culture," she said. "I'm pretty happy with it. I think it's pretty solid."

Not about appearance

Growing up, the issue Nieland faced was less of whether she

accepted looking different and more about whether society did. Nieland spent much of her childhood bombarded with questions and comments, contrasting her appearance to her parents.

"When I was little, I used to not want to go out with my parents because I didn't want others knowing that I was different," she said. "It wasn't necessarily the fact that I cared that I was adopted or that they knew I was adopted, it was just having to explain everything over and over and over again."

Nieland doesn't look like her parents, but she doesn't look like her sister, either. She describes also-adopted Abigail as a "stereotypical Han Chinese" with a "flatter face," pale skin and really dark hair and eyes.

Despite their physical differences and lack of hereditary connection, the two hold the same relationship as any other pair of siblings.

"I feel like I relate to her the same way as two sisters normally relate to each other," Nieland said. "The only difference is we're not biologically connected."

To some, Nieland may seem to have adopted a culture. She has spent her entire life on American soil, raised by American parents and taught by the American educational system. According to Nieland, her view on life has been shaped by the culture in which she grew up instead of the one in which she was born.

"There's nothing major in myself that I associate with being Chinese other than my DNA," she said. "In terms of culture, I would identify with being white."

Far away family

But she doesn't disregard her biology completely, despite it seeming like such a minuscule part of her. Nieland's "Chinese Sisters," the group of girls who were adopted from her orphanage at the same time, help her keep in touch with her Chinese roots and accept her differences.

Their relationship, similar to that of cousins, are long-distance yet long-lasting. "They're scattered over everywhere," Nieland said. "I have some that live in Virginia, some that live in Illinois. I think someone lives in Colorado. They're just kind of everywhere."

Nieland's mother plans varying reunions with the other girls and always makes sure to stop to visit if they're nearby.

Most recently, Nieland spent time with Julia, one of her "Chinese Sisters," at the Museum of Science and Industry. She was Nieland's crib-mate and the two relate because of their common origin.

"Having a connection — even if it's just a minor connection — with other people that go through the same things can help in the long run," Nieland said.

Aside from her sisters, Nieland keeps her Chinese roots through small celebrations, such as Chinese New Year, occasional Chinese dinners and the adoption days of she and her sister. The little commemorations remind her of her biological roots and help her keep in touch with her identity.

Nieland once took a Chinese class, but she quickly discovered it wasn't for her.

"I know that some other families get into it," she said, "Have their kids take lessons in Chinese, things like that. I think, in terms of self-identification, it isn't so much who you *were* but who you *are*."

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Nieland has embraced both her American culture and Chinese biology in order to create her own unique cultural identity. "I know I am [Chinese]," Nieland said, "It's just, culturally, I'm not. But ... there's a physical aspect of me that is."

"You can't deny one part of yourself," she said, "and accept another part."

Top: Junior Rachel Nieland and nine girls adopted from her orphanage are gathered together at their first reunion.

Nieland refers to these girls as her "Chinese Sisters."

Middle: Nieland's father teaches her how to swim.

Bottom: On Christmas, Nieland and her adoptive sister Abigail pose in front of the tree. | Photos courtesy of Nieland

