

Optional Reading: "Be Proud Of Where You Come From": An Indian-American Teen's Winning Podcast

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Reporters: Cory Turner and Sequoia Carrillo

Kriti Sarav does her best work in a narrow bedroom closet. Wedged in among plastic storage bins full of spare sheets, blankets, and pillows, the 16-year-old podcaster sits at a small desk with a microphone and headphones. "We got really lucky because when we moved into this house, they had this desk here," Kriti says. "I like it for podcasting now — and storage, obviously."

It was in this tiny closet that Kriti recorded the podcast that won our high school grand prize in this year's NPR Student Podcast Challenge. The story, about her struggle to embrace her Indian-American identity, was the unanimous choice among the judges.

When we visited Kriti in Chicago, something else in her makeshift studio caught our eye: a shrine carved of wood, about the size of a basketball, that sits empty for now.

"It's like a mini-temple kind of thing," Kriti says. Inside once sat a small figure of the elephant-headed Hindu god, Ganesha. Kriti says it used to hang in their old house, "but now we just took his figure and put it down in our kitchen because this was a little too bulky and heavy."

Kriti identifies as Indian-American and says the hyphen is important: Her podcast is all about growing up between cultures and how, at times she resented the parts of herself that didn't seem to fit the mold she saw around her.

"My honey-brown skin contrasted greatly with the peachy whites and olives of my friends," Kriti says, early in the episode. "My parents called me *raja* and *beta*, not munchkin or cutie-pie. When I opened up my lunchbox, I had a thermos full of daal and rice and chapati and roti — not mac n' cheese or PB&J."

The older she got, the more insecure she became about her Indian heritage, especially when her grandmother would visit Chicago from India, wearing a sari and the traditional red bindi on her forehead.

"I hated the way other kids would look at my grandma and me shopping. I hated the way they would ask if her bindi was a mole," Kriti says in one of the podcast's most painful moments. "Deep down, I wanted to rip that bindi off her head and cut off her long, thick, dark, braided hair and put a nice dress with a blue cardigan on her."

After years of internalizing these feelings of otherness, Kriti says, she realized recently that *she* had become her biggest critic. And she wrote her winning podcast, "My Very Own Bully," to take back the narrative and finally say: Enough is enough.

Kriti says for so long she worried about seeming different, because the world was constantly telling her she *was* different. She remembers being 9 years old, when, out of the blue, a classmate told her: "Hey Kriti, your skin's the color of poop."

And then, there were the constant, agonizing mispronunciations of her name:

Kreedy, Kyreetee, Chrissy.

"I got an award," Kriti says, sitting on the floor outside her closet studio. "And they said my name was Chrissy Sarva. And that's just not my name!"

For the record, it's pronounced *KRIH-thee suh-RAHV*.

As a kid, Kriti started to believe all these messages, telling her implicitly or explicitly that she was different, that she was *weird*. For years she hated her name, and says she once asked her mom if she could simply go by Kiki.

"On the tennis court, no one really says my name right. And I do think that contributes to a lack of self-confidence on the court," Kriti says. "I've never corrected anybody on the tennis court, and I don't know why it is."

But making her podcast, and coming to grips with her identity, she says, taught her a lesson:

"It really doesn't matter what you or anyone else, for that matter, says to me," Kriti says toward the end of her podcast. "What matters are the words that I whisper, day in and day out, to myself."

What are those words?

Kriti leans across the bedroom floor and, with a smile, whispers quietly into our microphone:

"I am strong. I am powerful. You have such an amazing and vibrant culture. You should just be proud of who you are. Be proud of where you come from."

Kriti hopes her story can provide some comfort to all the other kids out there who've felt this kind of isolation and pain.

These days, when Kriti isn't in school [University of Chicago Laboratory School]

or on the tennis court, she's sitting in that narrow closet, next to Ganesha's empty shrine, talking into the microphone about... financial literacy. She has a podcast called "**WhyFI Matters**".