

Essay #1 – Sienna Alday
2nd Place - \$1,500 prize
Stamford High School
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Red, White and Royal Blue

Since I was young I've felt as though cinema speaks in a language that only I could fully understand. It has given me whispers of comfort when I needed it, taught me lessons I wouldn't have otherwise learned and just allowed me to have a place in the world, even when I felt like I didn't. Red, White and Royal Blue was one of those films that explore the difficulties that biracial and non heterosexual people, such as myself, face in everyday life. I'm half white, half Hispanic, have struggled with my bisexuality and have been torn between wanting to be myself while also wanting to fit in, without jeopardizing who I was. This film has helped me with that.

When I saw Alex Clermont-Diaz go through his shifting in between different aspects of himself, I realized I could too. He'd go from speaking Spanish to minding his p's and q's in English and that was something that I had always had problems with. I was never Spanish enough for the Spanish kids and never truly fit in with the white kids. Alex never let that bother him, though. He kept being himself as he switched between worlds and took it all in stride. His dad was working class and taught him to be down to earth while his mom was the president of America and taught him to be strategic, assertive and how to think creatively. He revealed to me that you can embrace the contrasting parts of who you are without letting it consume you. He showcases both sides in numerous situations that prove him to be a role model who mixed kids like me can look up to.

Another reason I'm inspired by Alex is because he realized he was bisexual and the similar struggles he went through validated some unresolved emotions I had. The movie didn't provide the skepticism and fear that accompanies this situation through Alex, but that terror was later shown through Prince Henry, which helped me feel a little more normal when it came to having those feelings about my identity. Alex's journey through the beginning of his sexual awakening really resonated with me. He was confused, fearful and was seen questioning every inch of his identity due to this one new fact, which is also common in this process. Eventually, just like everything else, he took it in stride and acknowledged it as an aspect of his identity, but not necessarily something that defines him. Once he's outed as bisexual, his one focus is how Henry is handling it, not what people are saying about him. This proved to me that in the end, it doesn't really matter what people think and anyone should be able to love anyone without worrying about the delicate social rules they are disrupting.

This lesson on being who you are despite potential backlash also applies to Alex's mom, Ellen Claremont. In the movie's reality, people want a strong woman in power and as someone whose country hasn't yet shared that same thought process, it was really beneficial for me to see a woman like her on the screen. She was a powerhouse who stayed true to what she believed in and while she occasionally had to compromise, she still dominated a stereotypically male field while not letting it affect who she was. She let people say whatever they wanted and

continuously disproved their doubts. She was never given a place at the table. She demanded it and eventually got all around respect for who she is. I have dedicated hours of my life to get people to accept me but it's characters like her that show me I don't need their acceptance and I certainly don't need to compromise who I am for their approval. She is a feminist vision and has taught me so much about getting what you deserve with poise, elegance and grace.

This essay began with the question: did this film make you feel seen or accepted? In short, yes it did. Most minority characters, whether they are a person of color or identify as LGBTQ are typically swept under the rug or are forgettable. These are powerful, well-rounded characters that can't help but be loved and accepted as the atypical leaders that have stormed modern day media. Cinema is important, not just as a temporary escape from a lackluster life, but as a way to create entirely new universes that show us anything is possible.