

The warmth of the car contradicted the outside January weather, and the hot air melted the ice cream inside the cup that a 17-year-old Ash Duong was holding. Her friend was behind the wheel, the car parked in their driveway, and three of Ash's other high school friends occupied the other seats around her. They all were talking about everything and nothing at all in a car that became a second home to them.

Conversation flowed easily, as it always did with Ash's long-time friend group. But in a very random and unorthodox lull in conversation, one of her friends came out to the group as bisexual. In a domino effect, the rest of them continued to reveal the same.

Then it was Ash's turn, and she revealed her bisexuality to her friend group, something she had been working up the courage to do. "It felt right," Ash says, a small but satisfied grin decorating her face. "It was equally scary though. Whenever you come out, you have that fear lingering in the back of your head like, "what if they don't accept me?" But they always do."

Duong, the 19-year-old daughter of two refugees from Vietnam, is a woman of many passions. From acapella to environmentalism, she has a busy lifestyle. However, it is her ability to live a Hannah Montana-esque double-life that makes her stand out from all the others. As a queer woman-of-color, Ash is doing her best to maintain a steady equilibrium between her closeted home life, and her life at Boston University, where she is out to everyone. Despite it being so easy for her to come out to her best friends, her family is a whole new hurdle that she must muster the strength to hop over.

Ash's double-life begins at home, with her parents. With the passion that Ash discusses her relationship with her parents, outsiders may believe that Ash shares all her secrets with them, including her sexuality. Her parents set high expectations for her and taught her to be loving, independent, and how to put people first. "I struggled by putting people first too much," says

Ash. “Your importance stems from the way you treat other people. If you treat people like shit, none of that [scholarly achievements] matters.” Putting people first stemmed into a problem for Ash. It may seem harmless, but it got to a point where Ash would neglect her happiness and need for the satisfaction of others.

At Branford High School in Branford, Connecticut, Ash suppressed a huge part of her identity to fit in with others. As a queer woman-of-color, Ash had to endure a multitude of microaggressions within a predominantly white town. “It’s hard taking such an important part of yourself and hiding it.” Says Ash. These microaggressions ranged from people gagging at the Asian foods she would bring to lunch to people mispronouncing her last name and doing nothing to correct themselves. “I always knew I would be at a disadvantage, no matter what,” says Ash.

For Duong, she didn’t realize how being queer and a woman-of-color was such a big part of her identity until she hit college. “Asian people aren’t the beauty standard in America,” Ash says. Her identity is something she is incredibly proud of, and she refuses to silence herself on the matter, especially seeing the mistreatment of Asian people during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building this strong foundation of identity and sense of self is something that Ash prides herself on, but it wasn’t easy for her to get this secure with herself.

Being closeted at home, queer, and a woman-of-color comes with an internal battle with herself. “There are equal moments of struggle, mental health wise,” says Ash. She is very open about her struggles with her mental health, and how it stems from her upbringing, the tight-knit family, with parents who, to Ash, don’t seem to be accepting of queer lifestyles.

She changed therapists to an Asian woman, to have someone who understands what she’s going through help her. This therapist is helping her come out to her parents, something she originally didn’t plan on doing unless she was dating a woman. “I want to be able to tell my

children that I'm queer, that it's okay to like the same sex, without having them hide it from my parents," Ash says.

Prior to her accepting herself and jumping over the hurdles of internal homophobia and near-crippling anxiety, Ash viewed herself as a bad person. "I was genuinely convinced that I could always be better," Ash says. Her therapist told her to keep a notebook and write the things she liked about herself, but she found that difficult. "I was so deep in self-loathing, I couldn't list one thing," Ash says.

However, she managed to find a way through, and she created a crutch for her identity-based anxiety through her interests and hobbies. "The things I love are a part of the reason why I keep on going," says Ash.

Her mental crutches are making people happy, enjoying the mundane beauties of life, and the sunset. Inheriting her love for putting people first from her mother, Ash loves seeing people smile. She loves being able to do that for others. "It's not just what I can do, it's what I also love," Ash says. She loves watching the sunset, watching the sky burst into the beautiful oranges, yellows, reds, and purples to escape her family, the people she was hiding most of her identity from.

Ash lives by this quote by an unknown author, "To not dance when you had the health and could hear the music could be the biggest regret of your life." It encapsulates so much for her. "I try to appreciate what I have," says Ash. She understands how difficult her life is, going from being out, free, and proud at school, to being closeted and hidden at home. Despite all of that, she makes the most of her double life.