

Every month,
you'll meet teens
whose unique experiences
might make them seem
like they're from a different
world—but in reality, you'll
find that they're just
like you.

I love that my
purple-blue eyes
make me look
unique!

Different
Like You

Elizabeth Is Albino

Fewer than 5 out of every 100,000 people in the U.S. are born with this rare genetic disorder. Elizabeth, 16, is one of them.

BY ELIZABETH ARMSTRONG,
AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

Casper. Snow White. Paper. Freak. These are some of the not-so-nice names that I was called in sixth and seventh grade. One girl would often get my whole class to tease me, and nobody would sit with me in the cafeteria.

That's because I was born with a medical condition called albinism, which I'll have for the rest of my life. It means that I have no **pigment** in my skin or hair due to a flaw in my genes.

I used to get made fun of a lot at school. This one time, a mean girl came up to me and asked, "Are you

mentally unstable? Can you do witchcraft and magic?"

Sometimes people think the stupidest things just because you don't look like they do. I said no to both questions, of course. She replied, "That's not what one of my uncles said." I got so angry that I threatened to hurt her if she wouldn't be quiet.

We both ended up getting in trouble. She had to write a report about how albinos aren't witches, and I had to go to in-school suspension for three days. I feel bad that I stooped to her level, but she made me



My family:
Mom, Dad,
my sisters,
and me!



I am legally
blind and use a
cane to detect
curbs and curves.

so mad!

It's not just school that can be difficult, though. When I'm walking down the street or at the mall, strangers stare. People come up and pet my hair, like I'm some sort of puppy. Other times they



talk to me like I'm 5 years old. My brain works just fine, thank you very much!

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

I remember the first time that I realized I was different. I was 5 and was playing with my cousin. He grabbed my arm, held it next to his, and said, "Whoa! You're so pale!" At the time, I had no idea why. Eventually, I learned that I had albinism.

Living with the condition has its challenges. My skin burns really easily, so I have

to wear sunscreen every day (and there's a lot of sunshine where I live in Tyler, Texas!). And if I ever tried to dye my hair, the chemicals would burn my scalp.

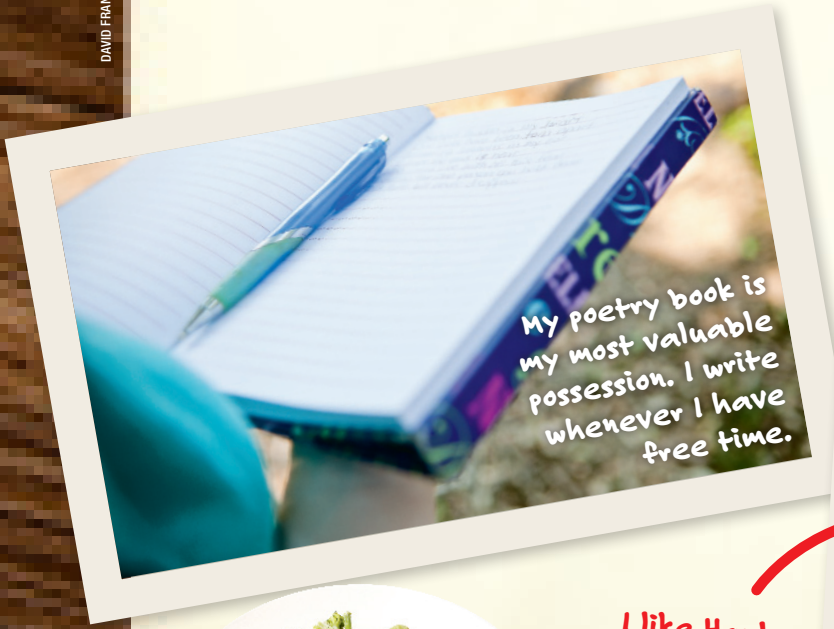
I'm also legally blind. I have trouble seeing super-small things and super-faraway things. Reading a menu or the chalkboard at school is hard, so I use a cool handheld telescope that works as a magnifier. I also have an eye condition called nystagmus, which makes it hard for me to focus.

I use a cane whenever

I'm walking in an unfamiliar area to detect any curbs or curves. Driving, if I attempt it someday, will also be tough. I'd have to use a special telescope that attaches to glasses, and I wouldn't be able to drive faster than 45 miles per hour, at night, or on highways. I'm not ready to try it yet. I'm too afraid of hurting myself or others.

FINDING A BFF

In eighth grade, things started to change for the better because I met a girl named Rachel, who is now my best friend. She doesn't judge me. We both listen to screamo music—it's the best—and I love that she doesn't care what anyone else thinks of her. It has

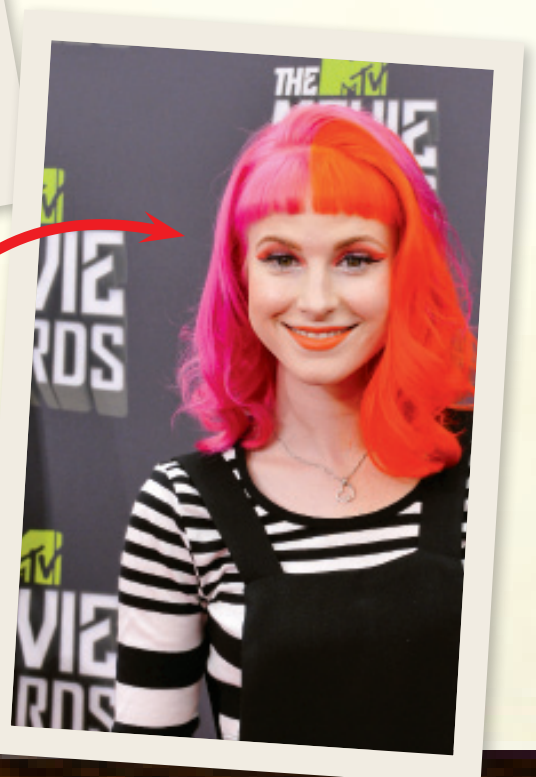


My poetry book is my most valuable possession. I write whenever I have free time.



I love pasta Alfredo with chicken and broccoli!

I like Hayley Williams, the lead singer of Paramore. She's really cool and shows that you can be different.





I want to go to Italy someday...so I can eat more pasta! It looks beautiful.

helped me realize that I don't need to care what anyone thinks of me, either.

Every day at school, I brace myself, because once in a while a classmate will still call me a name. But I've learned to shrug it off. Instead of getting mad, like I used to, now I just ignore it. Plus Rachel stands up to those kids and says stuff like, "Leave her alone. You're not perfect." It's awesome that she has my back like that. I feel less alone.

LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

There are actually benefits to my condition. For one, I might qualify for a scholarship for full college tuition. And I got a free iPad, because it helps enlarge some of the text I need to read at school. I also go to summer camp with other teens who



I always watch the cartoon Adventure Time. It's so funny!

have visual **impairments**, where I get to go rock climbing, boating, and more. And check out my eyes! I have a special eye color because I'm albino—it's a purple-blue color. I love that I look unique.

FEELING STRONGER

When I first tell people what albinism is, they feel sorry for me. But everyone has something that they struggle with. I know that I will always have to deal with being bullied and having visual impairment, but when you go through stuff that's hard, it gives you a thicker skin and makes you a stronger person.

I've accepted the fact that I have albinism, and no matter what people say, I know that I'm doing just fine—and that's all that matters.

3 Things Elizabeth Wants You to Know

1 TRY NOT TO JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS. Just because albinos look different on the outside doesn't mean they're different on the inside. I'm smart and I have feelings, just like everybody else.

2 DON'T UNDERESTIMATE PEOPLE. Sometimes my mom, my two younger sisters, and my two older sisters will say stuff like, "I'm not sure if it's safe for you to walk to the store by yourself since your eyesight isn't great." But I can totally do that on my own—I'm more independent than people think. If I need help, I'll ask for it!

3 STICK UP FOR OTHERS. When Rachel yells at bullies who tease me, it feels so good knowing that I have a teammate who is always on my side. If you see someone else being treated unfairly, always stand up for him or her!