**Refocusing the ORDER in Skin DisORDERS via VOFY**

I grew up like every other kid: I binge-watched High School Musical marathons like there was no tomorrow, ate too many chicken nuggets at the premium McDonald's, and cried when my parents didn't buy me that Justice diary that we all knew I was inevitably never going to use. It was safe to say that I was just your average second-generation immigrant with a glimmer of inspiration and contentment radiating from my melanin-blessed body.



Now, this is supposed to be the part of the article where I input the cliché "but then I wasn't so average" or "my uniqueness came later as I blossomed". As tempting as those statements were in my first three drafts of this blog, I am going to be completely honest: I was embarrassed, but, most importantly, scared.

When I reached around 5-6 years old, I started noticing white patches come across my body. The most noticeable ones were the irregular-shaped spots on my face, centering around my eyes to illustrate my marks as almost a bad spray tan or wearing goggles on a hot summer day. Then, the white marks moved farther along my neck and arms. While the quantity of these patches were minimal, I was timid as to how I was going to explain this to my friends and family. Dermatologist after dermatologist, they all stated the same four dreadful words: there is no cure. Now, I was no beauty queen, but I was a young girl trying to fit into the mold of a society who was not used to people who have my condition. I was diagnosed with Vitiligo in a rare form when I am exposed to excessive amounts of chlorine.

For those of you reading this and unaware of this condition, let me break it down for you. Melanin is the substance that creates the color in one’s skin; however, in the disease coined vitiligo, the melanin cells either die or stop functioning adequately which results in light-colored small or large patches. The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) describes vitiligo as "more than a cosmetic problem” (AAD, 2018). It is a health issue that needs medical attention (Medical News Today, 2017). The immune system attacks or destroys melanin cells with the mindset that the melanocytes are equivalent

to a harmful disease. In America alone, 2 to 5 million people have the disorder. While vitiligo is more noticeable on darker skin, it can affect all ethnicities and backgrounds (Steiner et al, 2004).. The exact causation of vitiligo is unclear for several studies have concluded that there are several factors contributing to the sudden or natural lack of melanin cells. In addition to the causation of vitiligo, effective cures to vitiligo are yet to be discovered.

It wasn't necessarily the phenomenon that I had spots on my face that I made me embarrassed about, but it was more of the public (grueling) questioning component. Kids had questions, and they were entitled to their doubts. For, one day there was a fresh-face Sarah, and the next, she had white marks by her pitch black eyes. Remarks like "why is your face messed up" and "cow" taunted, haunted and exhausted my mind like there was no tomorrow. It was a dark time, but (I told you I liked clichés, didn't I?) there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Ointments and sun exposure eventually brought my melanin back to the center of my face, but very few spots still linger on my body. It wasn't until I was in the 7th grade that I realized that I was tired of my self-doubt. When you are your own worst enemy, you block your own success. YOU block your potential. YOU are the bad guy. YOU don't realize your worth. That's what I was doing. The remarks slowly dissipated, but I started to embrace the whispers behind closed doors.

Henceforth, when Shri posted about the Vitiligo Organization For Youth, I was excited to start my role as an ambassador and executive position for a disorder that I let control me for way too long. My role will be to amplify silenced vitiligo ambassadors and populations all across the world and to bring awareness to skin disorders with an emphasis on dermatology. As your Miss Saint Louis' Outstanding Teen, I am so proud to be on this national vitiligo platform and announce my support for this beautiful non-profit organization. I wanted to put the ORDER back into the DISORDER that I let define my worth. Vitiligo is, even though there are definitely better words, cool. It sets me apart. It's a part of my story. European beauty standards and community pressures have backed me into a corner for way too long. Beauty is not flawless. Your worth is more than life condition, circumstance or trauma.

So, hi. My name is Sarah George. I am 17 years old, and I have a rare form of a skin disorder entitled vitiligo. I am just like any other teenager: I binge-watched All American marathons like there was no tomorrow, ate too many chicken sandwiches at the premium Popeyes, and cried when my parents didn't buy me the new apple watch that we all knew I was inevitably never going to use.

There is a social stigma when it comes to disorders, and that stops right here right now. It is imperative that we recognize that the connotation we put behind words is all a human phenomenon.

So, hello human reading my article! If you read up till this point, you are already pretty dedicated to this cause because you are willing to listen and read different perspectives. Think before you characterize someone with a disorder and evaluate the ramifications behind stereotypes. In a world that is more divided than before and in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, we all need to be allies. Our country needs to come back to an order where all people are treated equally. So, stand, sit or kneel with me as we chant "refocus the ORDER in skin disorders".