

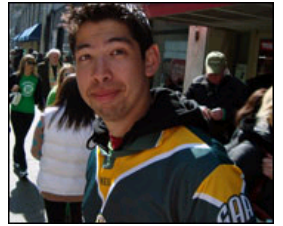
# HEADLINERS

## Inside Identity

**As Derry strives to become the UK's City of Culture 2013 the people on the streets of the city become more multi-cultural every day.**

Unfortunately Derry is still no stranger to racism and discrimination.

Headliners spoke to a 20-year-old man from the Chinese community about growing up in Derry and the Northwest feeling like, in his own words, an 'outcast'.



### What is your name?

My name is Gavin Leung and I'm 20.

### Where were you born?

I was born in the city of Portsmouth in the south of England. I moved to Derry with my mum when I was seven. I am currently studying in Coleraine.

### How would you describe your ethnicity?

I would usually describe my ethnicity as being mixed or "half-cast". My dad is Chinese, from Kowloon, Hong Kong but my mother is white Irish from Derry. Half-cast I suppose is a derogatory term that most mixed people would consider offensive, but it's just a term I've grown up using myself. In recent years, my brother, sisters and I usually prefer the term "Eurasian" (like European-Asian). My siblings and I can't speak Chinese or understand it, so even in the Chinese community we are considered outcasts. What I find funny is that Chinese people see us as being white, and white people see us as being Chinese. There really is no way to win.

### Have you ever felt discriminated against because of the colour of your skin or because people see you differently?

Always. People take one look at you and just "assume" straight away that you're different. Ironically I used to work at a takeaway, and when people came in to order, they started speaking slowly to me when they were ordering because they didn't think I could speak English. On the plus side, I've never been asked to play professional ping pong or join a maths club, so not all stereotypes apply to me.

### Has your family struggled in any way while living in the Northwest because of their ethnicity?

My siblings moved over to Derry not long after my mum and I, being half Chinese, I was bullied while growing up. The irony is that it was mainly my Irish "family" and their gang of friends who were the culprits.

### How did you overcome this experience and what support did you receive from school, organisations, friends, family etc.?)

A few of my more decent cousins stepped in to help me out and after a while I finally made a few friends. Life seemed to get a bit better for me from that point on. When I went to secondary school, I was a recluse for the first few years and became more withdrawn, because I lacked the confidence to open up to people. In fourth year, I met a group of really great guys who I became friends with and they invited me to come to Headliners. I haven't regretted that decision since, or the friends I made and the confidence I gained in myself.

### Do you think discrimination against ethnic minorities is on the rise or the decline in the Northwest?

To be honest, I'm in two minds. I would like to think that the abuse I've received over the years growing up was just one of those things that seem really bad during childhood. Looking at the abuse that foreigners such as the Romanians in Belfast, or the Chinese students or any other culture receive... I think it will be a long time before discrimination in this country will be a thing of the past. When I was younger and more bitter, I'd always found it funny when people would say "Irish people are the nicest people in the world", and I always used to think "Right, just come to Ireland and find out for yourself." It's not fair to generalize because I've met a lot of great people and friends over the last few years. But I've found that because Ireland is a country that's basically apart (geographically) from the rest of the world, it's more self-enclosed, therefore people who have never left Ireland tend to be more closed-minded. If more Irish people travelled and experienced the world, I think that levels of intolerance and discrimination would be lower than they are today.

### How do you think discrimination manifests itself in the Northwest?

It really can take any form, from the most extreme, like the attacks on the Romanians, verbal/physical abuse etc, to the most subtle, like dirty looks, speaking in an exaggerated slow tone or just not speaking with that person whatsoever.

### Have you travelled much or spent any time abroad?

I must say that I'm pretty fortunate to be a young person that has managed to travel quite a lot at a young age.

### Were you treated differently in other places to how you have been in the Northwest?

When on holiday, most people ignore you anyway, and you're constantly surrounded by tourists, so you're almost camouflaged by everyone else. But when I went to live in Lawrenceville, New Jersey in the USA for a year, I can honestly say that it was the first time in my life that I never had racist abuse or comments thrown in my direction. It didn't matter that I was mixed; most people couldn't even guess what my nationality was. I was just myself, and that's all that mattered. I was in contact with people from 50 States and 26 other countries and nationalities. It really was a completely liberating experience. It was great to know that there is somewhere out there that I can be myself without being made to think that there's something wrong with me.

### How does your experience living where you do now compare to when you lived in Derry?

Well I actually still live in Derry, but I must say that I do believe that acceptance and openness of other cultures is getting better than it used to be. For a long time, I remember that my siblings and I were the only mixed/Chinese people in our area that I knew of, and it was kind of hard trying to fit in when you stuck out like a bad penny. But today, Derry is becoming more multicultural and I think it's mainly thanks to the international students program at the University of Ulster which is bringing in more diversity to the city.

People are afraid of what they don't understand, and that hate usually leads to racism and prejudice. By introducing different cultures and nationalities, slowly but surely these prejudices are being broken down and people are beginning to be more open-minded.

#### **Have you ever been the victim of a racist attack or racist abuse at any time in your life?**

I used to be beaten up by my cousins and their gang of friends when I was younger. Now and then, even today, I get the odd bit of verbal abuse, and I flinch every time I hear the "C" word (the five letter word rhyming with "ink"). Other than that, I've reached a point in my life where verbal abuse just goes over my head. It's always the same thing, and nobody comes up with anything original anymore.

#### **Has your family ever been victims of this?**

I'm sure my dad has, and my brother. But as for my two sisters, they are generally lighter skinned, so not really. And my mum is white anyway so definitely not.

#### **What advice would you give to a young person from an ethnic minority growing up in the Northwest?**

Growing up I had a lot of identity issues, and for a long time I hated the fact that I wasn't white. I became really closed off from the people around me, and eventually suffered from depression for three years. The fact of the matter is that it took me too long to realise that I am an individual. I have every right, just like everyone else, to be who and what I am. So what if you look or act differently to other people? Don't allow society and its prejudices to put you down and stop you from fulfilling your dreams.

#### **About this interview**

This interview was carried out by Headliners Foyle member Aoife O'Connell (19)

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