

## Call me by the *Right* Name (Please!)

By Erianne Lewis

One thing that has been consistent in my life for the last 21 years is the mispronunciation of my name. From family members—many of whom cling to my nickname “E,” like a safety net—to old babysitters, coaches, teachers and more; *so many variations over the years that I wonder if I’m saying it wrong at times*. The seven letters that make up Erianne love to stump people. I’ve heard everything from *eri(ann)*, *eri(yen)*, *ari(el)*, *ari(ana)*, *ari(ann)*, *eri(n)* (did you even try?) and the list goes on.

Learning to pronounce someone’s name correctly should be something that goes without saying. Making no attempt to do so can dive into larger issues of lack of respect and microaggressions.

It’s likely the spelling that confuses people. Although the second half is spelt *anne*, it’s actually pronounced like *yawn*. My parents, in their originality, couldn’t have imagined the confusion this would create.

I’ve found myself in recent years casually mentioning “it rhymes with carry on,” an ode to *Keep Calm and Vote Erianne*, a slogan I used in my fifth-grade campaign for class president. A play on the *Keep Calm and Carry On* global phenom that engulfed the 2010s, it stuck then, and I *secretly* hope with each future introduction that it will continue to.

For most of my life, I didn’t feel anything about my name. It was something I was born with, and I never knew a life without, which resulted in it not taking up any additional space in my mind. It wasn’t *unique* to me because I didn’t pay much attention to the *uniqueness* of the names of people around me.

There were no deep conversations about the origins of my friends’ names, because they were just names to me. The older I’ve gotten; the more people have started to comment on my name, and it’s caused me to develop an interest in names.

It’s almost like the more people complemented or questioned its origins, the more I began to appreciate the distinctness of it. It feels at times like a badge of honor, even though I didn’t earn it. But I feel defeated when people say it wrong.

This isn’t something that has truly bothered me until recent years. I feel like it’s the only thing I can think about anytime I find myself in a new setting. I’ve altered the way that I say my name, making sure to overenunciate it so that people are able to pronounce it clearly on the first try. I find that people like to repeat it back to me (which I appreciate), just to make sure they’ve heard it clearly. It’s often followed by a “pretty,” or an “oh wow, that’s cool,” or “that’s different” or “does it mean anything?”

“It’s made it up,” I’m usually quick to jokingly respond, followed by “It’s a mixture of my parent’s names ... Eric and Andrea.” Surprised “ohhs” usually come next and I can see the two pieces of my name aligning perfectly in people’s minds. Although it doesn’t have a conventional

meaning, my parents chose it because they wanted a name that would be racially ambiguous, which is something that I've grown to love about it.

However, first day of school anxieties intensify when you have a name that people are bound to say incorrectly. There are teachers who try to outright pronounce it. The ones that give a disclaimer, the ones that sigh before mumbling something about the difficulty of it and the ones that try and turn an uncomfortable situation into a joke. I've even had teachers ask if I (or other students with "non-traditional" names, often people of color) go by any nicknames off the bat, without even attempting to sound out our names.

I've always struggled with correcting people's pronunciation after the initial correction. Every time someone mispronounces my name, I feel myself slightly grimace (often not detected), but it's still not enough for me to correct them most times. It seems simple enough that if someone is saying your name, something that belongs to you, incorrectly, then you would be quick to tell them.

It's always the phrasing of the correction that agonizes me. On the first day of school, it's easier to correct someone when they mess up. However, when it gets deeper into the semester or longer into your friendship then I feel like it's harder to mention it, without making the other person feel extremely bad about it.

I never want to come across as being harsh or angry, but sometimes I can let it go too far.

My sophomore year of high school, I deliberately let a teacher call me by the wrong name for an entire semester. I finally garnered the courage the next semester and told her that I *thought* she had been mispronouncing my name. I didn't *think*, I knew for a fact, but once again the desire to not want to come across harsh controlled my wording.

I could tell she was uncomfortable, and she proceeded to write it down phonetically. The next day in class, when calling attendance, she hesitated before saying my name. I could almost see the gears turning in her brain as she tried to figure out how to say this name, that all of a sudden was foreign to her.

She looked up at me and sounded it out (which made it more excruciating). I wanted to seep deeper into my chair. For the rest of the year, she stumbled over it every day and I wondered if my correction was worth the embarrassment I felt.

Although, I can't imagine a world where I'm not Erianne (my parents considered Erica and Erialie — I gasped when my mother suggested the latter), this newfound appreciation I have for my name, still only goes so far. To the baristas at coffeeshops, I'll still be Erin (because it's easier to spell, I tell people). Every once in a while, it is nice to be Erianne though.

In undergrad I took a class where I spoke about how, unlike many of my friends that were named after relatives or historical figures, I don't feel the weight of expectations set by being named after someone else. Though I do sometimes wonder, because my name is unique, is that an

expectation in itself? Am I now charged with doing something remarkable or the *uniqueness* of the name goes to waste?