

Being Who You Are

Music and Lyrics by Elizabeth Alexander,
With students from Waunakee Elementary School

In 1992, as composer-in-residence at an elementary school in Waunakee, Wisconsin, I was charged with collaborating with students to compose two “school songs,” which would welcome newcomers to the community and reflect the values of students, teachers and staff.

At our first meeting together, many of the students arrived with their hearts set on composing *Free To Be You and Me*, a song which they already knew and loved. This would have been a terrific idea, except that the song had already been composed by somebody else!

So the first thing I did was explain that you couldn’t actually compose a song that had already been composed. Instead, we were going to compose a brand new song. The room was full of long faces. Finally one disappointed student asked, “If we can't compose *Free To Be You and Me*, can we at least write a song that says it's okay to be who you are?”

So that's exactly what we did.

The students and I drew up a long list of free thinkers and courageous trailblazers, both historical and fictional, and set about telling their stories through song. One student noticed that all the percussion instruments in the music room made unique sounds, so we decided to let them represent the unique natures of our song’s characters.

Our own completely original song, *Being Who You Are*, was premiered by the entire student body of Waunakee Elementary School, a chorus of nearly 500. I am pleased to say that this remains my largest choral performance to date.