White Walls

I was in the fourth grade. My afro was probably about 4 inches high in the air at that point and man was I proud of it. My record was 8 pencils that could fit in my hair at one time. Pretty impressive if you ask me. I was stoked. The second week of April was standardized testing week, which meant all the students 4th-8th grade was dismissed at 12 PM. The teachers stressed so much that we try our best and do the best we can, because our scores reflect well on the school. We got the test and had to flip to the back page to fill out all of our personal information before starting.

*Name:* Brooks West. I filled out all the bubbles of the letters in my name.

*Birthday:* 04/03/1998. Eight more bubbles filled in.

*Race: Mark one or more boxes.*

*White                                                            Asian*

*Black, African American                              American Indian*

I looked around. Everyone had their heads down diligently filling out the bubbles, by far the easiest part for them. I half put my hand up to ask a question and put it back down. I was surrounded by white walls. White teacher. White students. My mom was white and my dad was black, so which do I put? My skin was brown, but there was no other brown people around me to ask the question to. I genuinely had no idea. Everyone was finishing up and my teacher, Mrs. O said, “Look up when you’re finished.” My hands began to sweat and I panicked and filled out both. White, bubbled in. Black, bubbled in. I knew my name, I knew my birthday, I knew how to write the cursive saying my work was my own and no one else’s, but I didn’t know my race. I don’t even know if I really knew who I was.

I went home that day and built up the courage to ask my dad when he got home from work what I should’ve bubbled in. At that age I was probably the shortest guy in my grade, certainly not five foot, and my dad’s six-foot frame towered over me. I looked up to him physically and literally. He had curls, like my afro, but tightened down and not nearly as long. He had a thick black mustache that has been perched above his upper lip for the last 30 years and a pot belly that has grown and grown for the same amount of years. We’ve always had a fun relationship of best friends almost, but he got serious that day in his black suit carrying his briefcase in from the car. I mumbled briefly the story about the test and said, “I don’t know, what should I have put?”

“You’re Black. You fill out black. That’s all, nothing else.”

According to a Northwestern University study, r[acial classification](https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/how-are-black-white-biracial-people-are-perceived-in-terms-of-race) in the United States defines Black by, “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.” A person could have a black father and white mother like me or have a black father four generations back, they are still considered black. But what does it mean to be Black. The race isn’t merely just a color of one’s skin. If one was to search, “black definition” with no context from the [Merriam Webster dictionary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/black), a whole lot of results show up.

“The opposite of white - *the color of coal*”

“Very dark in color - *his face was black with rage.*”

“Of or relating to African American people of their culture - *black literature.*”

“Dirty, soiled - *hands black with grime.*”

“Thoroughly sinister or evil - *a black deed.*”

“Indicative of condemnation or discredit - *got a black mark for being late.*”

Nothing really positive at all. In fact, almost all negative. The word itself has a negative connotation. What does that say for the race itself? Through the racial classification of “Black” the race is set up to fail, set up to have a negative connotation, a negative perception. Look at the differences in the definitions of white.

“Free from color.”

“Marked by upright fairness - *that’s mighty white of you.*”

“Being a member of a group or race characterized by light pigmentation of the skin.”

“Free from moral impurity - *innocent.*”

“Not intended to cause harm - *a white lie*.”

“Favorable, fortunate - *one of the white days of his life.*”

The differences are telling and speak for themselves. One positive, one negative.

In the movie, [Blind Side](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0878804/), Michael Oher, is taken in by a white family and placed in an all-white school but is a tremendous athlete. All of the teachers look at him and think he’s stupid. The color of his skin and economic background *discredit* him. They make jokes behind closed doors about him, except one teacher believes in him when she pulls out of the trash a poem he wrote about his life in school that reads,

“I look and I see white everywhere. White walls, white floors and a lot of white people. The teachers do not know I have no idea of anything they are talking about. I do not want to listen to anyone especially the teachers. They are giving homeworks and expecting me to do the problems on my own. I have never done homework in my life. I go to the bathroom and look in the mirror and say “This is not Michael Oher.”

White has the opposite meaning for Oher than the dictionary defines. The walls being white are not positive. The walls *cause harm*. The walls are not *favorable* or *marked by upright fairness*. The walls are more *dirty, soiled, sinister.* The simple fact of that matter is millions of students go through schooling surrounded by these white walls without black representation in schooling.

Of the projected [56.6 million students](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372) who will attend elementary and secondary schools, 7.8 million of those students are Black. A whopping 13.7%. In my grade school alone there was 3/490 students. Me. My twin sister. My older sister. 1%. The problem faced isn’t even about the students. The percentage of white teachers in the United States is even higher: [82%, with only 7% being Black teachers.](https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf) I didn’t see a black teacher in my entire education until I went to college at Penn State University. What about the black students who don’t go to college? The likelihood is incredibly high that they will have never seen a teacher the same color skin as them. Maybe not have had a teacher that understands them or can relate to them. One of the dominating issues facing the youth of America is black representation in the country’s school systems.

I am from Delaware County, Pennsylvania, a population with over 550,000 people, but only [22% black](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/delawarecountypennsylvania/HSD310216#viewtop). 2 out of every 10. CYO (Catholic Youth Organizations) rivalries run deep with the rich traditions of Catholicism. People don’t ask where are you from, they ask, “what parish are you from?” On Sundays Roman Catholic church parking lots are filled throughout the county from 9AM to the last mass at 11:30AM. All my friends, family, teacher pretty much everyone I knew was Catholic and had deep generational roots to their grade schools.

I went to Catholic grade school from K-8th grade, as did my father, but it was a different time in 1976. My siblings and I were the only black students at St. Mary Magdalen which was considered the rich school that all the other schools made fun of for being snobby. It was located in Media, an area with an even lower percentage of [11% black residents](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/mediaboroughpennsylvania,hazletoncitypennsylvania,chestercountypennsylvania,philadelphiacountypennsylvania,US/PST045217?), but it never really affected me. The racism wasn’t blatant and I was too young to even know truly what racism was. The same can’t be said of my father. He went to grade school in a still safe area of Clifton Heights. His hometown was definitely lower economically and rougher around the edges, more a blue collar area. He said of his experience at St. Gabriel’s,

“The issue was when we moved from Philadelphia to the ‘burbs.  I was the 1st black kid

to go to the local Catholic school [1976 and 1977].  When my mother tried to enroll me at

the school - the priest told her that there was no room at the school.  My mom told

him that if he did not find room -- on the 1st day of classes she was going to take me and

put me on Cardinal Krol’s [the archbishop of the archdiocese] doorstep until

someone found room for me at the school.  Suddenly there was room at the school for

Me.”

The white walls for my father were a lot thicker. A lot more constricting. The racism was blatant. He still loved St. Gabe’s and all of his childhood friends, just as my sisters and I did. The four of us learned the hard way that the prejudice never came from fellow students. Never. We all never had an issue with another student. All my friends were white, but one has always stuck out through my life, Rob Morro. He is from my parish and his family has almost directly kept my faith alive. I’ve gone to church with them a hundred times and their life revolves around God. Rob has always been the nice, faithful guy that has rubbed off on me. Race in their home was never an issue for me, it was something I would never even think of when I think of my relationship with him and his family. He said of our experiences through life together side by side,

“I remember when we were really little most kids didn't treat you that different, but they

did think that because you were cool with all the white kids, they could make jokes about

you being black and expected you to be ok with it. You always exercised a lot of patience

with these kids.”

I never saw it that way. Friends made jokes, that’s what friends did. We played basketball at recess and I was always one of the first kids picked. I was athletic. But I got a lot things said to me like, “You’re black you have to be good at ball.” Or during soccer games if one of the other teams ever had another black player, “Oh God, I hope our black is better than theirs,” like I was property or something. I was honestly a product of the system of racism, I was blind to it. Students were never the issue; I can’t stress that enough. The same can’t be said for parents. In high school I couldn’t go to a girl’s party because her parents weren’t comfortable with me being there. I was with my ex-girlfriend at the time and she was a freshman and I was a junior. We were at her house, planned to go to the party together, and her friend texted her saying, “Hey like I’m really sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with him but my Dad won’t let Brooks come, I’m really sorry.” Again it was parents. Parents wouldn’t let me come to a party because of the color of my skin. If I was white it wouldn’t even be a discussion. That denial was sort of the first time I had something blatantly racist happen to me and I didn’t know how to handle it. I was disappointed, angry, and honestly confused. I wasn’t alone. My dad says, “Dating was a whole other story -- white parents did not and would not accept their daughter dating a black kid back then.” Have things changed in 30 years? Unfortunately, no. My older sister, Jessie, was forced to break up with her first boyfriend because of parents that she’ll never quite forget.

At the time of the breakup, I didn’t quite know what happened. I would make fun of Jessie for him breaking up with her because I would have never in a million years guessed it was racial. Her ex's family had a brother in my grade who was my friend and my family saw them in Church. Jessie in 8th grade was struggling to find her identity before this even happened. She would constantly get in fights with my dad about wanting to get Keratin in her hair so it would be straighter. She had long curls that were beautiful in my dad’s eyes, but not in hers. In her eyes she was different. She didn’t think guys saw her like the other white girls. Then she finally met a nerdy kid in one of her honors classes, who saw her as beautiful and they dated for a little bit. Jessie was happy, her boyfriend, Ryan, was happy. She said, “for the first time in my life I felt seen by a guy. And then parents got involved. Kids weren’t allowed to be kids. Black and white *had* to matter from the eyes of parents. Jessie said,

“Everything was going well, until his parents found out he and I were dating. Basically, they shut it down. He told me “I’m really sorry I can’t see you anymore my parents said you’re not supposed to date people from the jungle” and that people of different races weren't supposed to “mix” and then basically all communication was cut off. No phone, no social media, all our lines of communication were shut down. I remember being so desperate to hear from him my best friend called his home phone one day asking to speak to him pretending to be another parent to see if he was attending my graduation party.”

High school or middle school relationships are usually deemed of little importance, but dating is something that comes with the territory, successful or not, in schooling. Hell, Rob’s parents met for the first time in grade school and went to a high school dance together and some of the most in love people I have ever seen. Love can happen at a young age. For Jessie, because of her race, it was tarnished. Was she going to go to the school and complain? The school that is surrounded by white walls. The school that has a million dollar towering white church. The school that has hundreds of white families and parishioners and one black family. No. If there was a black teacher, for guidance, to ask for help, would she go to him or her? I bet she would.

In a Washington Post article, [Why white students need black teachers – by a white teacher](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GIC&u=psucic&id=GALE%7CA461206092&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon), a white teacher writes about the importance a black teacher had on her. Ashley Lamb-Sinclair was the 2016 Kentucky Teacher of the Year and had this to say about black representation in schools,

“Mr. Trumbo said to me, ‘You're a teacher, Ashley Lamb.’ I believed him. … He was the

only teacher I ever saw cry. He was the person who openly and thoughtfully talked to me, a young white girl, about being a black man. Even though I did have some insight, how could I have possibly understood the experience of black Americans unless someone took the time to speak openly about it with me? Mr. Trumbo did that. What would happen if every white student in the United States were taught by a Mr. Trumbo? I would like to think that racist rhetoric would be much harder to swallow and much more difficult for our young people to speak.”

What if? What if I had a black teacher growing up? What if my dad or sisters had a black teacher growing up? What if the walls weren’t all white? I can’t say for sure if having black representation would have affected me, but I know black teachers in the future changed my life. What if it didn’t take 19 years for that to happen to me?

I walked into Cardinal O’Hara High School and for the first time the walls weren’t all white. There was plenty of black faces. Not a single black teacher, but black students. I thought this would be the time I finally made black friends. I thought wrong. My twin sister, Jenny, said, “I didn’t feel alone until I got to high school.” We didn’t fit in with the other black kids at all. We were in honors tracking, none of them were in our classes. I remember one black kid at a lunch table next to mine and we were talking and he said, “You ain’t black. You’re more white than half of the kids at your table.” I never understood that. I still don’t. My whole life I’ve been told,

“You’re the whitest black kid I know.”

Why? Because I talk “proper.” Because I get good grades. Because I play soccer, not football or basketball. Why can’t black kids also be smart. Thirty some years ago, my dad had the same issue through the same glass doors of Cardinal O’Hara. The school looked the same. All glass windows, with a ginormous golden cross on the top of the school. But the walls couldn’t be whiter. And I mean that literally. He was the only black kid of 3,600 students. .02%. He stuck out like a sore thumb. Six foot, a mustache, a vintage afro like you see in 70s movies, and he was a black man. He said,

        “Everyone wants to fit in. Obviously the only black kid doesn’t fit in with a bunch of

white kids. Plus, my parents were divorced so when I went to visit my dad -- kids there

would think that I had my nose in the air, because I talked “proper.”

Now my mom’s story couldn’t be any more different. If my friends had to pick a parent that intimidates them more, it would be the six-foot black man, but the 5’1” ball of fire that my mother is. She is fiercely independent and does things her way. She grew up in Hazleton, Pennsylvania. [92.7% white, .82% black](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/mediaboroughpennsylvania,hazletoncitypennsylvania,chestercountypennsylvania,philadelphiacountypennsylvania,US/PST045217?). Hunting, woods, mountains, nothing similar. The walls were white and there wasn’t even close to another black student. “The closest thing to a minority was a Jewish girl.” The N word didn’t carry weight there. She said,

“It was used like any other noun. I didn’t even realize it was bad or disrespectful until I

was in my pre-teen years.”

How do a black man and a white woman, with lives so different meet and fall in love? Education. Penn State. Higher ranks of education, because of a small percentage of people that made it to college. If my mom came home from Penn State, and said she met a man who is a finance major and is going to law school, they’d be thrilled. A man that was going to be successful, the relationship and marriage would have been celebrated. But my dad was a black man that was a finance major and going to law school. That one word, “black” changed everything. He was *dirty, soiled, sinister*. My grandparents basically disowned my mom and said they had no interest in meeting him. She had one person on her side, my great granny.

“I remember my grandmother (whom I adored) asked why didn’t my parents approve, she asked me “does he beat you?”  When I told her it was just because he was black she told me that my father’s parents didn’t like my mother at first because she was not Catholic.  My grandmother always welcomed us in her home.”

My grandparents came to the wedding with my Pop-pop saying, “I guess we’re doing this thing,” as his way of accepting my dad as being black. I adore my grandparents, as did my mom her grandmother, and they’ve shown my nothing but love. Life could’ve went so different if my parents listen to what other people felt about them as a biracial couple.

Imagine if my dad fell into the trap of “being too proper” to want an education. But imagine this. Imagine if my mom had a black teacher? Or even better, if my grandparents had a black teacher or a white teacher that cared to address issues of race. Teachers can often time impact a mind so much at a young age. Teachers shape the minds of the youth, because children listen to teachers. Students at a young age trust teachers, I certainly did. If I had a teacher, talk to me about race, at a deeper level longer than five minutes every Martin Luther King Jr. Day, it could have greatly affected me.

An article, published about Ethnicity in a Race Changing World, [Who Should Teach Black Students? Research on the Role of White and Black Teachers in American School](https://search.proquest.com/docview/606987832?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=13158) says,

“This is not to criticize White teachers as their jobs are often challenging, ever changing, emotionally demanding, and not particularly financially lucrative. It is, however, necessary to investigate the importance of the discrepancy between the percentage of Black students and the percentage of Black teachers with the underlying assumption that Black teachers often serve a special role in the lives of Black students.”

My Aunt, Terri Pruitt, is my mom’s sister who I have adored my whole life. She is funny, smart, witty, and has been the perfect role model and Godmother to me my whole life. She is a white high school teacher and has done extensive research on how to benefit not only her white students but even more so her black students.

In my own personal experiences, white teachers and black teachers teach differently. Black teachers often teach how historically black students learn. All my classes with black professors has been mostly discussion and question based. My aunt says,

“I do find that black students tend to work really well collaboratively and thrive in active, busy classrooms.  Since the black culture focuses so much on family and community, I notice that the philosophy translates into the way students approach learning.  Group goals are important to black students; not that individual goals aren’t, but the black culture is so communal that the group goal is a natural proclivity.”

White students and black students act differently and learn differently. Learning and teaching is a product of culture and race norms. An issue arises when white teachers often tend to stereotype black students. Take Michael Oher from *The Blind Side* as an example. The system failed Oher academically. He made it into college and eventually the NFL, just barely reaching the academic requirements. But what about the black males that aren’t gifted athletes and are surrounded by white walls? What if they don’t have a white teacher that takes an interest in them and will never see a black educator to relate with? In the movie Oher has one teacher that really takes an interest in him. She is a white woman. A white teacher who realizes he is smart. She realizes that Oher isn’t understanding the tests so she gives him oral exams and he starts passing. She singles handedly helps get him through high school, finishing with a 2.5 GPA and he can go to college.

Select teachers that stereotype students and lump them into a category of “hopeless” or “stupid” is one of the problems with the American school system. Stereotyping brings on the larger issue of systemic racism in elementary and secondary school systems in the United States. The system can often set students up to fail. Set students up for a life that could’ve been far better. And sometimes it only takes one teacher to change all of this. A teacher that sees education that doesn’t have bounds regardless of race, and helps students realize that knowledge is the most powerful tool in the world. A teacher to break down those white walls. My Aunt said,

“Teachers have the opportunity - every single day - to make it level in the learning environment so that students have a fair chance when they enter the real world.”

And she does just that. She’s a teacher at a mostly black high school in Delaware and takes strides to help her black students academically and socially.

All throughout my schooling I’ve been called out for being loud. My “inside” voice was as if a normal person screamed across a valley and the words echoed over and over again. My sophomore year of high school my English teacher’s head was down glancing over an article as we read an individually assigned Shakespeare poem, and I leaned over in the far back corner of the room, whispering some joke to my buddy and heard, “Brooks be quiet.”

“What! Wasn’t me, you can’t even see me.”

“Did you ever learn how to whisper?” she asked, which immediately shut me up and got a couple muffled chuckles from my classmates.  It was always a “self-control problem.” In grade school I received a check (meaning I need to work on it) in self-control 12 times in a row on my report card. I wasn’t disrespectful or disruptive in my opinion, just loud. My aunt says,

“I attended a Ruby Payne training called A Framework for Understanding Poverty and part of the course focused on ‘Hidden Rules Among Classes.’ One of the concepts explored was about how black people tend to speak loudly, and that is definitely something I have noticed in my classroom.  The reasoning revolved around the cultural norms of “being heard” and establishing your dominance through voice volume. For a race of people who were silenced in our history, being heard was critical. To this day I think about the concept and rarely ask students to “turn down their vocal volume” as I know it is innate and not something they purposefully manipulate.”

Concepts like identifying black cultural norms are something every teacher could learn from. There are teachers who go above and beyond, teachers who stereotype students, and teachers who are incredible teachers but maybe are not comfortable with talking about race in the classroom. My aunt goes on to say,

“Another impactful text I studied in graduate school was *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools by* Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton.  As a high school educator, I must have difficult conversations about race in my classroom; unfortunately, many teachers avoid race completely because it is a “sensitive” topic or they are afraid they will say the wrong thing and “get in trouble” for it.  I never avoid the difficult conversations because they are the ones that matter. Honestly, I think that white students truly benefit from our conversations since they don’t often hear the “black voice” in their daily life and the opinions/experiences of their black peers are sometimes surprising to them.”

If one teacher I had in the 12 years of schooling before college would’ve done cultural training or educated themselves on teaching students of different races, maybe I wouldn’t have been self-conscience about talking loud in the classroom. Maybe I wouldn’t have got in trouble at home for another check in self-control. Maybe I wouldn’t have been seen as obnoxious or disrespectful in some of my classes. This isn’t to discredit my teachers because I have grown to love, admire, and respect so many past teachers of mine. They have helped shaped me into the man I am today. Teachers that go above and beyond to help their students, black or white, is what begins to end the problem of systemic racism in the school system. My Aunt goes on to say,

“Recognizing the need for black students to have a safe place to share their voices, this year I started the Black Culture Club (BCC) at my school, and the positive responses have been overwhelming!  We have over 40 members - black and white and brown students - and our meetings have been profound. Last meeting, three students shared original pieces which expressed some of the struggles they have as black young people.”

Teachers like this help eradicate the problem. They are cornerstones to this fight of equality in America’s school system. One day this semester, my aunt texted me talking about a student struggling to find his black identity and if I could talk to him. Since then I’ve become a mentor to Farid. I pass on ideas I learn in my classes, articles I read, important issues I find on social media. And it helps the both of us. The both of us find our own blackness, all because of one teacher. He vents through his writing, and without us ever meeting, he feels comfortable to talk to me, to open up. He always ends our conversations, thanking me for just talking.

“Thanks for relaying this information to me, it definitely helps a lot man.”

Pennsylvania State University. Only 10% black, but that ten percent brought my white walls crashing down like a demolition site. It took time as all construction does, but the walls slowly but surely turned to dust. Senior year of high school I received the [Bunton Waller Merit Scholarship](https://www.psu.edu/dept/studentaid/publications/scholarships_201112.pdf). “These fellowships and scholarships assist Penn State in creating a more diverse student body.” Somehow people at home had issue with me being classified as a minority. At this point my race is pretty established. I am a black male. Blacks are considered minorities in the United States. Simple? Not to everyone. This was an issue that I faced from not only parents, but fellow classmates.

I vividly remember one of my parent’s friends, another dad, during our THON fundraiser at a bar, going at it with my dad. One of my white friends, my dad, my dad’s friend, and me were sitting at a booth. They had both been drinking so raw honesty was coming out. He was a Penn State alumni and wanted his (white) son to go to his alma mater and was incredibly angry that his son didn’t receive a scholarship.

“He has a 4.0, at a harder high school, plays sports, better SAT’s, and doesn’t get money because Penn State doesn’t give money to white people.”

I brushed it off because I’ve heard it a million times before. My dad responded with some condescending remark,

“I’m sure they save all the money for the 100 black kids that go there. Makes sense.” Visible tension because of a scholarship that I earned. I’ve heard it all from all types of people, including people that are my closest friends.

“Must be nice getting a scholarship just ‘cause you’re black.”

“You’re the whitest black person I know, should give it to an actually black kid.”

“You should have to give half back.”

“If my son was black, would’ve got the same thing, but we have to pay full price.”

That’s just a small sample. Yes, I am half black, my mom is white. Yes, I grew up with all white friends and am articulate. Yes, my older sister, twin sister, and I received minority scholarships. No, I’m never going to apologize for getting a scholarship. I had a 4.0 in high school, was captain of my soccer team, had AP credits, and happened to also be black. I deserved it. I was involved in everything all my life and strive always to get great grades. I studied hard all throughout my schooling. My parents had three children going to college at the same time, they needed the financial support more than anyone. Jenny and Jessie both received the same Bunton Waller scholarship and Jenny says,

“This is something that frustrates me often. No matter the shade of my skin, I am a black woman. I am proud to be black and I will tell anyone who asks. A minority student who graduated Penn State and went on to be very successful started the scholarship that I have been awarded in order to better the chances of people like them being successful in college as well.”

The issue of systemic racism in the school system was following me to college. People were legitimately making me feel terrible for getting money to the school of my dreams. The money should go to the poor black students. The students that live in poverty. Not me. Why is it that minorities deserve scholarships? Articles argue that it is “reverse racism.” White students deserve the money. Not the 10% of black people at Penn State. Bunton Waller describes the reasoning as, “Factors such as economic disadvantage, geographic diversity, and ethnic/racial underrepresentation at Penn State place high-achieving students under consideration.”

Contrary to popular belief it seems amongst my friends and parent’s friends, not all black people receive scholarships to college. Mark Kantrowitz publishes Fastweb.com, a free scholarship matching service and is the author of the book, Secrets to Winning a Scholarship. Kantrowitz contradicts the notion of minorities being more likely to receive a college scholarship saying,

“In fact, they are less likely to receive college scholarships. And they represent about a third of the applicants, but only about 28 percent of the recipients. Caucasian students receive 72 percent of all scholarships. Minority students receive only 28 percent of all scholarships.”

My sisters had similar responses when asked about their frustration with people labeling a stigma on these scholarships. Jessie says,

“When I got my scholarship to Penn state, a school that “doesn't give out scholarships.” I was so deep into agreeing with white people about my blackness at that point that for a long time, all throughout my senior year of high school after the scholarship and my freshmen year, I agreed with them. I had internalized people always telling me things about what my blackness meant that I actually believed it myself. I remember arguing with my dad because I was ashamed of the scholarship. I would say there are kids smarter than me that didn’t get it, how do I explain that? Of course it's only because I’m black! Eventually I realized the flaw in that logic. Now I will actively talk to them about diversity, affirmative action, privilege, neighborhoods and communities, and the impact of the education in different parts of town, everything that goes into this process. I seek out the conversation because I think the pinnacle of those statements is just ignorance. They are mostly spewed by white people that have never had a conversation with a black person in their life.”

Academic scholarships come from a place of intelligence. Brown, black, Asian, white, the money awarded comes from intelligence, but sometimes the system fails to acknowledge that simple fact. Let me repeat that.

Academic scholarships are awarded based off of one’s intelligence.

Sophomore year was new for me. I abandoned my business major that I was struggling in. I took up English. I wanted to write. Write about things I cared about. I also took my first African American Studies course. AFAM is where I found myself. For the first time in my life I had black teachers. I looked at the front of the room and saw someone who looked like me. That year in my Creative Nonfiction course I had to pick something to write a meditation on. I chose a meditation on the word nigger. It was the first time I typed out those six letters in that order. It was the first time I wasn’t scared to take on a subject with that much gravity. There was no shame, no fear, it was almost like a weight was lifted off of me because I embraced who I was.

Professor Charles Lumpkins, my *Living While Black* professor, was the first professor, who was confident enough in his convictions, to use the word nigger, describing his own personal experiences, to help students learn in an academic setting. He was an old man with a full grey head of hair, a grey beard, and big bulky glasses. Every day he wore a shirt and tie with a cardigan sweater. The word was said many times throughout the class. He didn’t sugar coat teaching. He said the word when he said people called him it. He said the word when he talked about the Civil Rights Movement. He was an honest man, as honest a teacher I’ve ever had. He challenged all of his students, black or white, but he wasn’t worried about being politically correct. Sometimes I would look around and see some of the white students visibly uncomfortable of his sheer honesty, but the looks on their faces didn't affect his teaching and storytelling. He taught to inform his students and did just that. I learned things about black people I’ve never heard in my life. Without him, I would never type out those six letters. He impacted me to embrace my blackness, and want to fight to make a difference through my writing. Every class he started with a video, but a class at the end of April was different.

Professor Lumpkins played a video of a white girl from Penn State that happened days prior. The [video](https://nypost.com/2018/04/30/white-sorority-sisters-saying-n-word-in-video-face-backlash/) was of a girl singing the lyrics to a song Freaky Friday by Lil Dicky and Chris Brown. The song, by Lil Dicky, takes a lyrical, hip-hop approach on the movie “Freaky Friday” starring Lindsay Lohan. He switches bodies with Chris Brown and they are rapping about their experiences in each other’s bodies, playing on racial stereotypes, black and white. One of the lines when Lil Dicky is in Chris Brown’s body (Chris Brown singing but Lil Dicky ideas) is,

“Wonder if I can say the N word (wait for real?) Wait, can I really say the n word? What up, my nigga? What up, my nigga? Big ups, my nigga, we up, my nigga. … Cause I’m that nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, I’M THAT NIGGA!”

The sole, main purpose Lil Dicky uses is: he can only say it because he is now in a black body. The girl was dressed like a white sorority girl at a Penn State Football tailgate. She was blonde, a pretty girl, and was screaming the N word on video for everyone to see. Not only was the viral video brought up in my class, it was brought up in my scholarship meeting by [Jamie Campbell](https://directory.smeal.psu.edu/juc27), the Assistant Dean of Diversity Enhancement. I couldn’t have dreamed in earlier schooling an issue like this being brought up in an academic setting. But at Penn State, they were. Both men were honest about it, said how they felt and asked how we felt. Jamie, as everyone in the scholarship called him, was also Black, intimidating at first, tall, always wearing a bow tie. He’s a serious man but the more you get to know him, the more that serious wall comes down. He makes jokes in meetings and makes everyone laugh and feel comfortable. Every month our scholarship met and had presentations from different businesses and learning opportunities.

This Monday at the end of April, Jamie stood before us at the head of a lecture classroom in the Business Building with all eyes on him, and there were no jokes, no laughter. He opened up saying that, “I’m sure most of you have seen the video that has been going around. She is also in the business school and this is something we take very seriously.” He went on to tell us his thoughts on how the word made him feel watching the video and how it should make us feel.  He then asked our input, asked how it made us felt, and told us he’d do everything he could to make a difference and make sure it doesn’t happen again. When the words, “everything I can do” came out of his mouth, it couldn’t be more serious. His words couldn’t be more convincing.

For the first time, I really believed someone was going to make a difference. I felt like we were controlling the narrative for a change. I felt bigger than myself, fighting social justice. Two black men, one semester already had as much an impact on me as almost all my teachers. The difference was how honest they were with me. Jessie says of Jamie,

“He was really the first black person in my life that wasn’t my family that I spent enough time with that he really impacted me. He was smart, intimidating, always pushing me to be better, and he was candid. He kind of without ever explicitly saying it, mentored me into coming into my own blackness.”

Penn State changed my life and is ever changing my life. I don’t see that systemic racism here in the school systems that slithers its way through ranks of lower level education, and I hope other students have the same experiences at colleges across the country. The school has pushed me to embrace who I am. I’ve had teachers who are black. Students who relate to me. Penn State is the reason my mom and dad met and fell in love. College was the reason why three black siblings can embrace who they are racially. Ten percent may seem minimal but it is enough to change one’s life. Penn State University was the wrecking ball that came crashing through the white walls. The walls collapsed and my life and my blackness were rising on the piles of dust I left behind

I know who I am. And I am black.

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