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My Whiteness: A teacher's efforts to explore the roots of her own racial identity

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My Whiteness:
A teacher's efforts to explore the roots of her own racial identity

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Abstract:

This Independent study is an attempt to explore the roots of my own racial identity in order to become a culturally sensitive teacher. It is preparation for teaching in a classroom where most of the children will be from a different background than my own.

The study explores research on the work of other White teachers and moves into a personal narrative of my own life and family history. Using interviews, a family document, and my own memories, I have compiled a personal narrative that explores my history with race, my values and how I came to be the person I am today. This exploration allows me to better understand what I bring with me to the classroom.

I have changed the names of my teachers, family members and friends that are included in this narrative to protect their identities.

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INTRODUCTION

When trying to decide on a topic for this master's project, I stopped to reflect on my Bank Street experience. I wanted to choose something that would enhance my experience, a topic that would prepare me for my work next year and something I felt hadn't been sufficiently explored during my coursework. The task wasn't easy. When my advisor asked me what I was passionate about I responded; I am passionate about teaching next year and being done with my degree. I am ready to be in the same classroom all day, everyday, as the head teacher. I am passionate about teaching in public school, in particular one that serves a high need population.

That is when it hit me. I can't ignore the fact that if I am going to teach a high need population in New York City I am going to be teaching primarily children of color who live under the poverty line. I have always pictured myself teaching in a diverse setting. However, I had never thought about how my racial background would influence my relationships with parents, children and colleagues.

I am White, upper class, heterosexual, female and Christian; every category that I belong to is one that I know I will be accepted for in this country. When I go to school, go to a job interview, fill out an application, walk into a store, drive down the street or simply meet another person, I never think about whether or not my race, class, sexual orientation or religious preference will

negatively affect how those around me perceive me. This is indeed a privilege, a privilege that many in this country do not have.

I have recently been hired by a public school in the South Bronx where 97.3 percent of the students receive free lunch and less than 1 percent of the students are White. (Insideschools) Out of approximately 500 students it is possible that there could be five students in the entire school from a background similar to my own. The other 495 will not be.

I grew up with the idea that “colorblindness” was the key to racial equality from a teacher’s standpoint. In other words, if a teacher were to treat every child in her classroom as a unique individual who needed love and support, she would be doing her part in creating racial equality. I agree that children should be thought of as unique individuals who need love and support but I think the task of creating equality is more difficult than it initially appears.

In my mind there are two problems with colorblindness that I have come to recognize over the years. The first is that if we fail to recognize the differences that present themselves in the classroom we lose an invaluable opportunity to celebrate culture and diversity. In addition if we, as teachers, think that we can treat every child the same by not recognizing their differences, we are wrong. I know I carry racial and cultural biases with me into the classroom. For this reason I must be actively aware of the backgrounds of the children in my classroom in order to attempt to break down and compensate for the biases that I carry.

Julia Landsman (2001), in her book about being a White teacher states that,

We believe we are “colorblind”, a notion from the 50s and from the Regan years when it was considered wrong to recognize our differences. We White people hide from the fact of skin color difference, we often fail to speak directly at work about students who are different from ourselves. (xi)

In interviewing my older sister she also commented on how she feels White people often think about race. “I think most with people in the US don't even know they're White. They don't know what it feels like to be the minority. They've never been conscious of their culture or skin color.”

I realized that these statements may not be true for some White Americans but they are true for me, and many White Americans that I have met over the years.

Vivian Paley (2000) wrote the book, White Teacher, after a meeting that she and other faculty members had with some Black parents in the school where she worked. In the preface, Paley tells a story about sitting down with these parents expecting to hear what a wonderful job they were doing as teachers. Instead the parents reported feeling that their children were being singled out and not given a fair shot. Paley admits the teachers were “caught by surprise, as though none of us has a clue about the things we are hearing. ‘You’re wrong’ a teacher says. ‘there is not color line here. All the children are treated the same’” (preface)

Paley then describes going back into her classroom after this incident and taking the time to observe how race affects her behavior as well as the behavior of the students in the classroom. Through careful observation she notices ways in which race affects her interaction with the children from a different background than her own.

From this experience, Paley began to actively work to recognize her own biases and change the way she viewed and celebrated difference in the classroom. The reaction of the teacher in the meeting is something I have witnessed in schools growing up the idea that people of color are making up irrational complaints, playing the victim or being too sensitive. The question often then arises from us, members of the dominant culture, what do you want us to do about it? What are we doing wrong?

RATIONALE

I specifically remember a forum on race that we had in our high school. The high school was small enough that we all sat in chairs in the cafeteria and there were some microphones at the front of the room. Anyone could get up and comment on how race affected our daily lives in school. A few Black students got up and commented on how they didn't feel comfortable at school because of their race. More specifically one classmate of mine said that when she walked into a room everyone could tell that she was Black and that; the rest of her White classmates didn't have to deal with judgments just because of

our skin color. Puzzled by this comment, I got up and expressed frustration that, of course when you walk into a room people know that you are Black. “When I walk into a room everyone knows that I have on a pink shirt. If there is a difference in how you feel you are *treated* or viewed because of skin color then that is what we should be talking about.”

Some White students in my high school expressed frustration and anger after this forum. The students of color couldn’t provide us with any specific changes that we could make, any suggestions for how we might make the students of color feel more comfortable. Many of the White students left that forum feeling very frustrated. *What were we supposed to do about the problem?* At the time I didn’t understand that some of the students of color probably just wanted to raise awareness. Perhaps they didn’t want the White students to make specific changes, they just wanted us to think about how race affects our lives and how it affects the lives of others.

When I step into my second grade classroom next fall I want to be confident that I have taken steps to become increasingly culturally sensitive and self aware about how issues of race directly affect my life, specifically the way that I teach. Literature on this topic suggests that a White teacher can become more prepared

to teach in a classroom where most of the children are of color if she takes the time

to look at her own racial history, how she was raised and where her biases originate. In hopes of gaining a heightened awareness of how race affects my life, and the lives of my students, I will be looking at myself as a product of my family, my family history and my education.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Developing my racial identity does not have a straightforward starting point. In starting to explore these issues, I reviewed literature that reinforces the idea that being a White teacher in a diverse classroom can be difficult. This challenging social dynamic presents difficulties that the teacher may not fully understand.

The literature that addresses this issue has slightly different solutions/approaches, but tend to agree on a first step. The literature supports the goal this work by repeating that the first step to becoming a more culturally sensitive person of racial privilege is to take the time to explore ones own “racial history”.

Julia Landsman (2001) in her book, A White Teacher Talks About Race, describes her reasons for writing the book. She explains that, “In our twenty-five largest cities, students of color are in the majority in all but two. By some estimates, 40 percent of our students will be of color in all classrooms in the

United States by the year 2000.” (ix) In actuality “42% of public school students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group in 2005, an increase from 22% of students in 1972.” (NCES) Landsman doesn’t present this statistic as a threat to force teachers to take action. Rather, she presents it as an opportunity to celebrate what this change could hold for the educational system. She explains, “I also believe that the presence of more students of color will increase the standards for our students reading, writing, math and science, as well as in compassion, cooperation, and global knowledge” (ix)

Landsman also tells us that the number of teachers of color are shrinking, creating more and more classrooms where the teachers are White and many of the students are of color. Landsman explains how she addresses this in her classroom. She describes bringing history and culture into the classroom through student voices, celebrating stories and customs, differences and similarities. She also tells stories of her own students, their struggles to understand and navigate the dominant culture, as well as her success in connecting with some of them after a bond of trust is formed. One student’s experience is particularly noteworthy. Landsman talks about Shantae, a young Black girl who grew up in the United States. Landsman describes an essay that Shantae wrote about how she wished she could be an American. Landsman responds,

I believe that one of the ways that Shantae will come to feel like and American will be through seeing and hearing her ancestors’ stories as part of her school experience. When we celebrate

Shantae's rich culture, when we include her history, when we integrate her life into every subject in our classrooms, I believe she will begin to feel that America is a place she can truly call her country, her home. (viii)

Before she explains her experiences, Landsman begins with a section titled, "Before school: What I bring". It is a chapter on her own life: what she brings to the classroom, her personal experiences, biases, and background. This is her first step in the exploration of what it means to be a White teacher in the multicultural yet divided society in which we live and work.

Gary Howard (1999) takes a more direct tone in his book, We Can't Teach What We Don't Know. Howard begins by pointing out that, "White teachers are themselves the products of predominantly White neighborhoods and predominantly White colleges of teacher education." (2) Many White teachers have not taken the time and energy to think seriously about how race affects our lives and the lives of those around us. "We are in danger of perpetuating the kind of privileged non-engagement with the real issues of social justice that have characterized Whites for far too long." (5) Many well-intentioned, caring teachers despite excellent character simply have not had to confront issues of race and therefore don't know what it means to fight for social justice, especially from the perspective of the minority student. Malcolm X said that "We can't teach what we don't know, and we can't lead where we won't go" (4) How can we teach our students to be socially aware, culturally sensitive students if we haven't deeply explored these issues for ourselves?

Howard challenges White educators to play a large role in the social transformation of White dominance. He believes that if we look closely at our own lives and work on our own personal transformation in order to become aware of White dominance we can begin to assist in empowering our families, friends and students to do the same. Howard argues that, "Honesty begins for Whites when we learn to question our own assumptions and acknowledge the limitations or our culturally conditioned perceptions of truth." (69)

When we are honest about our own lives we can then move forward "to look deeply into the nature of dominance, to understand as authentically as we can the reality of its tragic impact in the lives of our colleagues and students, and then to struggle and work together to create healing responses to the river of change" (68)

In White Like Me Tim Wise (2005) talks about race not from an educator's standpoint, but he addresses the concept of privilege head on. He explains that we are born in to this privilege without any choice and we are also born into families without choice and both have very strong effects on our lives. "What I am trying to say is that when we first breathe outside the womb both literally and figuratively, we are never merely individuals; we are never alone; we are always in the company, as uncomfortable as it sometimes can be, of others, the past, of history."(2) He adds, "My parents were already who they were, with their particular life experiences, and now I was to inherit those, for good or ill, whether I like it or not."(2)

Wise also voices the opinion that Whiteness is a strong force in binding people together as well as separating them.

- Although Whiteness may mean different things in different places and at different times, one thing I feel confident saying up front, without fear of contradiction, is that to be White in the U.S., whether one is from the south, as I am, or from the North, West or Midwest; whether one is rich or poor; whether one is male or female; whether one is Jew or gentile, straight or gay, is to have certain common experience based solely upon race; experiences that are about advantage, privilege (vis-à-vis people of color), and belonging. (3)

Wise's approach is for White people to begin to start to recognize this privilege and fight to change the opinions of those who believe that race issues are not a problem or that people of color are not accurately describing the racism that they experience. It is only then that we can work to actively fight racism. Wise argues that, "The first thing a White person must do in order to actively fight racism is to learn to listen to and more than that to believe what people of color say about their lives."(67)

Rather to be White in America is to be so removed from the experience of people of color, that it should come as no surprise that to find Whites unwilling to accept versions of reality offered by those who are Black or brown. It is easy to dismiss what others tell you, especially when it reflects badly on a system that bestows upon you such an advantage. (4)

Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) in, Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria, very explicitly talks about the need for White people in this country to work to develop White identity. She explains that,

...Because they represent the societal norm, Whites can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about their racial group...there is a lot of silence about race in White communities and as a

consequence Whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something salient for them. But when for whatever reason to silence is broken, a process of racial identity development for Whites begins to unfold. (93-94)

The next part of this paper is an attempt to start to break that silence and develop my racial and cultural identity. I feel that examining my “racial history” is the first step for me to better understand my own attitude about race. I will now move to tell my story of how I can/came to be who I am. I will look specifically at how some members of my family, being part of the dominant culture, have interacted with those that were different than them selves. I hope that this will lead me to better able to open my ears to and my eyes to how race affects my students. I realize that this is a small step but it is an important step.

MY STORY: FAMILY AND EDUCATION

I will be writing this material in the form of personal narrative and as memoir. This assures that the analysis and conclusions I draw only represent my understanding and view of the material examined and how it influences me as a future teacher. It does not speak for my family’s views of the material or suggest that they might come to the same conclusions. However, it is my hope to share the material with those in my family who have shared their views with me, thus opening a further dialogue about our understanding of race as a family.

When talking about family and memories it is easy to get overwhelmed. There are so many memories and family members who have had an impact on who I am and how I view race. For this research I have decided to focus on two family members in particular. I have chosen to look at my mother as she has

probably had the greatest impact on my life and I will also be looking at my grandfather as he probably had the greatest impact on my mother's life. This combination of voices allows me to examine three generations and although it is only a piece of my history I think it will still be helpful in my pursuit. In addition I have also interviewed my older sister and I have included some of her thoughts as well. The interview information has been collected in the form of phone and e-mail conversations. Because of this, the responses have been grammatically edited for the purpose of clarity.

I would like to add that my father has played a very significant role in my development. There are many places in this narrative that are strongly influenced by my father's voice. However I have decided not to talk about him specifically. This is not an attempt to disregard the important impact he has had on who I am but instead to keep the discussion simple enough for the length of this work.

My mother is not especially charismatic or organized but when she gets inspired, she makes amazing things happen. She is passionate, she is a go-getter and because of that she has in small ways changed the world. She is excellent as a focus for looking at my family history as I feel that her passionate and somewhat rebellious attitude changed how my family viewed race, and particularly how I came to view race.

Earlier this year I thought about a particular instance in which my mom really changed the way I look at the world. I was encouraged to think about this further by a professor at Bank Street. I started to think more and more about how

one person could affect change in important ways through the family. When first thinking about my family history I looked more closely at some assumptions that I held about my family. I had assumed that my Virginia relatives, who were and are in some ways very “high society” Richmond, were upholding the status quo and supporting the segregated society in which they live. I also assumed that my mother had gone against her family expectations by raising her children much differently than she had been raised.

Part of what I have learned in this research is that my family’s “racial history” is far more complex than I had initially thought. Some of what I had assumed about my family is true yet some of it isn’t. The voice of my Grandfather will be explored through a book that was written about his life as he was dying from cancer. The voice of my mother will be examined through an email and phone interview and the voice of myself as I remember my grandfather and as I know what I know about my mother. Much of this paper will also be an attempt to mesh all of these voices. How do they fit together? And what can I learn about my family by seeing the ways in which the accounts are similar and different. This is an effort to understand the role of family in the construction of racial attitudes. I also will look more closely at my own childhood, my education and see what part that played in the way in which I grew up. In order to reflect on these memories in the most genuine form I have decided to not put the ideas of my mother and grandfather into my own words. I will use their words. This makes

this section full of lengthy quotations but I think it is more honest coming directly from them.

MY GRANDFATHER

In 2002, my grandfather was dying of cancer. He was heavily medicated for pain and had a hard time realizing that he was retired and was limited in what he was able to do. He was unable to go to work, drive and do all the things that had made up his daily routine for so many years. He was bored. He was frustrated and he was confused. My family decided to hire a writer to come document pieces of his life as a way to give him a purpose for those last months. The way in which the writer started the book seems very fitting. My grandfather lived a remarkable life, however,

...That life has not been pain free, but it has been distinguished for its integrity, attention to duty, humor and willingness to walk in shoes that by his own admission were not an exact fit. Hunter was of the old school who let off steam by complaining, but it never occurred to him to take those shoes off. (4)

Strongly affected by the Great Depression, my grandfather grew up very poor. Being poor was not uncommon but he still did not remember this as an easy time. As a young child he decided he was going to be successful in life and he worked very hard at that. My grandfather's only brother also has a large voice in the book and he remembers,

I have always felt a little inferior to Hunter, to tell the truth. Even as a kid he had very strong likes and dislikes. Hunter wasn't a rebel but he was assertive and stubborn. He'd speak up, and this is true to this day... Hunter just excelled in detail, which is one of the reasons later on he became such an excellent lawyer and executive. He also

could be combative and to such an extent that all during grade school and high school he was often referred to as "Bull Brighton" ...Hunter wanted to make money because he wanted to give his family the good things in life. But I think the reason he has been so successful in the corporate life is that he always speak his mind. He was willing to take the risk of speaking his mind and a lot of people aren't if they didn't like what he has to say, well then he was prepared to leave.

When my Grandfather died in 2003, hundreds of people attended his funeral. My older sister was asked to speak in front of those hundreds because his twelve grandchildren were a huge part of his life and we knew it. After his death the general assembly of Virginia sent the family a formal letter. I think the letter does an excellent job of summing up the "official" parts of my grandfather's life (I have changed some names, including that of my Grandfather to protect the identity of my family.)

Hunter. E. Brighton, Jr., a prominent Richmond business and community leader, died on April 14, 2003; and, a native of Lumberton, North Carolina, Hunter Brighton graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Duke University in 1942, where he was president of the student body, his senior class, and his fraternity; and, Hunter Brighton enlisted in the United States Navy, was commissioned an ensign, and served in the Pacific Theatre during World War II before being discharged in 1946 with the rank of lieutenant; and in 1948, Hunter Brighton earned his law degree from the Columbia University Law School and joined the Richmond law firm that was to become Hunton & Williams; and in 1967, Hunter Brighton left the practice of law to join Ethyl Corporation as executive vice president, and he remained with the firm until his retirement as vice chairman in 1985, after which he remained on the board until 1994; and a member of the board of directors of numerous public companies in the Richmond area, Hunter Brighton gave generously of his time and talents to civic and charitable organizations; and Hunter Brighton served on the boards of the United Giver's Fund, Junior Achievement, the Robert E. Lee Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and the Richmond Symphony; and Hunter Brighton also served on the boards of the Virginia Episcopal School in

Lynchburg, the Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges, the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Virginia, and Randolph-Macon College; and in recognition of his outstanding community service, Hunter Brighton was honored repeatedly by such organizations as the Public Relations Society of America, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Boy Scouts of America; now, therefore, be it by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly hereby note with great sadness the loss of an exceptional Virginian, Hunter E. Brighton, Jr.; and, be it that the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to the family of Hunter E. Brighton, Jr., as an expression of the high regard in which his memory is held by the members of the General Assembly.

This account of my grandfather is very informative and brings tears to my eyes every time that I read it. The account shows what a strong community figure my grandfather was as well as how hardworking and active he continued to be well into his 70s. However, like many well acknowledged White men of my Grandfather's time, my grandfather was racist. I hope here to provide some accounts of my grandfather's struggle with upholding his morals and complying with the status quo. My uncle remembers,

...What has always been attractive to other people about dad is that he's not afraid to speak his mind. Yet I remember once I wanted to get a bumper sticker, "question authority," and he went nuts. He struggled with those two sides of himself, wanting to preserve his reputation and be the solid citizen and do the right thing. Because if you don't, people will think you're weird and you've got to explain yourself. (39)

In attempt to get at this struggle in my grandfather's thinking I asked my mom questions about her father in regards to race. In the interview that I had with my mom I asked her, "while growing up did your parents talk about people of color? If so what kind of language did they use?" my mother replied,

Mom and Dad never used bad language about Blacks but they were very clear to us about the lines that the racial issue drew. It was basically two different worlds that existed side by side- I didn't really think about how the life of the Blacks was different until much later - probably around the time of Martin Luther King. Like lots of things in Richmond, Unpleasant things are not talked about ... So they don't exist.

I think this might be one of the most insightful things my mother said in our conversation. “ Like a lot of things in Richmond, unpleasant things are not talked about...so they don’t exists.” Because of this my mother never quite thought about her situation until later on in her life. I asked my mother to what extent was there diversity at her K-12 private school?

There was no diversity. There were no Blacks in any private school. In fact when integration were dictated by the government, that was when MANY White families pulled their kids out of public school. That is one of the reasons the public schools in Richmond declined so badly in the 60’s.

The school that my mother attended is the same school that all of my cousin’s attended and still attend today. My grandparents were huge supporters of education and obviously thought that this private homogenous education was the best the city had to offer. Statistically it probably was and is to this day one of the top schools in the state. It makes sense that my mother went to this school, as my grandparents were so prominent in Richmond. I asked my mother if my assumption of my Grandfather’s prominence was actually true. She responded,

Since Dad worked for a big law firm and then for Ethyl, Mom and Dad were expected to entertain often. So we had parties at our house often where we were basically to be seen, "meet and greet", and then disappear (which was fine with us). The interesting thing was that we always employed this wonderful Black family to help with the parties. Their names were the Lamberts. It was a mom, Dad and three sons. The youngest was perhaps 10 or 12. Dad was ALWAYS

extremely nice to them and very supportive and had nothing but great things to say about this family. We would often play with the kids during the party, when they were not helping. Interestingly enough, each one of the boys grew up to be VERY successful in Richmond. One was in the House of Representatives and the others did other things I just can't remember what. Papa was VERY prominent in Richmond. Mostly because in had a good job etc but he served on MANY non- profit boards and basically served the community in many ways. He worked very hard "did the right thing" to become what he was. I don't say that in a bad way. He came from no money in the depression so he was determined to make a difference- and he wanted us to have a good life. He supported STRONGLY education and gave lots of money to schools- Black and White. At one point he raised money for Virginia Union - which then was an all Black college. Don't misunderstand- he believed they should have a good education but there were still boundaries and lines drawn. It didn't help that the lowest income group was the Black population--therefore, that was the areas with the most crimes and therefore- Blacks must be bad.

My sister also commented on this boy who grew up to be a senator,

I went to Richmond after papa died to receive an award for him from the Virginia State Senate. It was presented by a Black senator whose father used to cater parties, for grandma and papa. The senator told a story about how papa always asked about how college was going for him, and how he used to slip the him money to take back to college with him. He seemed to care so deeply about other people's success.

I never thought of my grandfather as a racist. I never thought about any of us as racist. I guess I never even thought about it at all until one day I was with my grandfather at my grandparents' river house on the Chesapeake Bay. We were going to the grocery store together and we passed an elementary school. I asked my grandfather, already with the education blood in me, how are the schools around here? My grandfather replied, "they are terrible, I mean they are full of Blacks." I was so angry with my grandfather but knew better than to try to argue with him at the age of 75. There was something eye opening about that day.

I started to recognize more and more racist ideas that existed in my world. About five years later there was an incident that furthered my thinking on this topic.

My older sister has a best friend from our Seattle high school who has a Black father and White mother. Jon was a pleasure to be around and I am sure he still is. When Jon went to college he moved to the East Coast, as did my sister who attended the University of Virginia. When Thanksgiving of their freshman year rolled around my sister invited Jon to come to Thanksgiving with us and our extended family in Richmond, VA. From what I know, Jon loved our family and everyone was really nice to him. When we all left to head back to the west coast my dad stayed in Richmond for a few days for business. My dad later told me that my extended family had a conversation about my sister summer and Jon. My grandfather, along with everyone else, agreed that the relationship (even though they were just friends) was no good because if they were to get married they couldn't be married at the Country Club of Virginia where apparently everyone in my family was supposed to be married (my sister is actually married, not to Jon, but regardless, she opted out of getting married at the Country Club). My father was part of this conversation and after it had gone on too long he announced to everyone that Summer he was sure, was not planning

to get married at the country club regardless-so they could stop worrying about it.

My older sister in our interview also commented on the time that Jon came to Richmond, "I remember when Jon came to Virginia for Thanksgiving. Papa made a comment about "how dogs don't like Black people." I was surprised. I couldn't understand how papa could think something so silly."

I think my grandfather was a wonderful and exceptional man. He always told me "to whom much is given much is expected", and he worked hard to get to a place in which he could provide extremely well for his family and his community. My grandfather was strong, stubborn, hardworking and forward. I believe my uncle was correct however when he said that my grandfather struggled to be a respectable person in the eyes of a community that held very elitist ideals and the still always speak his mind and stand up for what he believed in. Nevertheless, he openly supported a segregated system and openly benefited from that system that allowed him to be at the top of the dominant culture. My grandfather loved his children. My mother and my grandfather had a very special relationship. He listened to my mother and she listened to him. They were very similar in many ways. In the book my grandfather says about my mother, "Annie is a honey, no she is far more complicated than that... I just plain love that gal." (21) And my mother says, "Dad and I used to have pretty volatile discussions that other children didn't have. I seemed to be the one who would confront him...and he really listened. He's my biggest fan to this day." (37) Whenever I would get

frustrated with my mother my grandfather would tell me. "Abby you have one helluva mother. It could be a lot worse."

MY MOTHER

My mother, as you have seen, grew up in a very sheltered community. Race issues were not something she encountered in her daily life. She knew how things were in Richmond, but just accepted that for what is was and didn't really care one way or another. When she went to college at Louisiana State University, she started to think about things a bit more. I asked my mother if there was any racial tension at LSU or at UVA (she spent two years at LSU and transferred to UVA when they started accepting women).

Actually, the first time I really got a big clue about it all was when I went to LSU. There I was a "northerner" and the girl next to me in the dorm came up to me right away and asked, "Would you sit next to a Black on the bus?" I was SO surprised with that question. I had never thought of it as something I wouldn't do because a person was Black, but I guess naively - something that just never happened. I do remember thinking while I was there- "Oh now I'm beginning to understand the depth of the racial issue and how truly ingrained it was in the minds of those college aged kids. It was SERIOUS to them. I began to realize that it was going to take many generations for this to change. Actually, at UVA, it wasn't an issue because there were so few Blacks there, that it wasn't an issue -- people were still trying to pretend that everything was "just fine." We were more concerned with Vietnam and "hippie" stuff.

Post-college my mother married my father and they eventually moved back to Richmond when I was about six-years old. My sisters and I lived in Richmond for seven years. We lived about fifteen miles away from my cousins and grandparents, who all lived in the heart of "Nice Richmond". We also lived

in a beautiful part of Richmond, but it was more suburban and more laid back and was the land of soccer moms, big colonial houses with huge mowed back yards, and very little diversity. We moved there because it was a bit more relaxed and the K-12 private school (a different one than my cousins attended) we went to was just down the street.

The only diversity I remember from my neighborhood was an Asian family that lived at the end of my street and a Jewish family that lived a few blocks away. At Christmas time everyone in the neighborhood put electric White candles in the windows. This family put blue candles in their windows and I remember thinking that it was so strange and just didn't look right.

My mother had decided she wanted to raise her children differently than she was raised. Her father was working so often and her mother is not the most affectionate woman. She told me earlier this year when I was writing a paper for a childhood development class that "Her parents were not very nurturing, they didn't breast feed and children in the household were expected to be seen and not heard. Interaction between parents and children was very limited." In addition she, in our interview commented that,

The most important value I wanted to teach you was honesty. Not just not telling lies, but being honest with each other and with yourself about who you were and what you wanted to do with your life and what things matter to you as a person. I always wanted you to know that we believed that there were lots of "right" ways and to always think for yourself. I guess the second most important value I wanted to instill in you girls was the ability to care passionately about something. I think that is what caused me to be involved with Gilpin Court and William Byrd -- I just could never stand injustice. I think even then had the attitude that we are ALL human beings

and therefore we all have so much in common that that is what we should be focused on and not how we were different.

My mother saw injustice as one of the major problems in her own community and started thinking of way she could help. She started volunteering at an inner city Richmond school on Friday afternoons. As part of the “always be honest to yourself” she always tried to be honest of/about who each one of us was. I have two sisters; I am in the middle. It would have been easy for us all to be encouraged to do the same things. Instead my parents focused strongly on our individual strengths and tried to develop those strengths. To this day my sisters and I are very different from each other, although we have very similar values.

I have been interested in teaching and being around younger children from a very early age. I was therefore allowed the privilege of accompanying my mom to this school.

“Time to go Ab” my mom would say on the first Friday of every month at 1:30 when I was pulled out of my fourth grade class. From 1ST through 7th grade I attended a very exclusive Christian school in the suburbs of Richmond Virginia. My fourth grade class was a bright sunny room in a gorgeous building. There were four separate playgrounds, two gyms, two libraries, a computer lab, a science lab, a music wing and an art wing. In other words, there was no shortage of resources. On Friday afternoons, however, I got to go with my mom on an adventure that caused me quite a bit of anxiety and

excitement. It was an adventure that put me face to face with the segregation that exists in our educational system. I accompanied my mom and some of her friends to an inner city Richmond elementary school where we provided games and treats for “fun Fridays”-- a party that k-2 children were able to attend if they had been very well behaved all week. I loved working with younger kids and seeing the ecstatic looks on their faces as we revealed an art or cooking project we were going to do. Inner city Richmond is still today a very low-income, segregated area. The school was incredibly under resourced and the gang and violence problems were high. I knew that many of the Black families in Richmond didn't have as much money as many of the White families I knew. I lived in an all White neighborhood and went to an almost all White school. The school where I spent my Friday afternoons was all Black. I once asked my mom why all Black kids went to this poor school and why only White kids went to my school. My mom explained that for years and years and years Black families in Richmond had been discriminated against. Because of this they were not given the same opportunities as many White families. She explained about the cycle of poverty or unequal education. She explained that it was a problem that society had created and a problem that society had to fix. She said that everyone had to do his

or her parts, to make our world a more equal and accepting place.

This was a lot for a 10 year old to take in but I gained a lot of respect for my mom that day because as far as I knew she had told me the truth, something I often didn't hear in my sheltered school.

My mother eventually decided that she really wasn't meant to be in the classroom but this didn't stop her from wanting to see change in the community. My older sister was a very talented soccer player and my mom and dad spent many a weekend in other parts of Virginia and North Carolina at her games. My mother reflects that,

The William Bryd thing came from Summer (my older sister) being on the travel teams and we would go to all the games and would never see any Blacks playing. I knew there must be talent there, but there was no way for them to get to play. I just kept having the idea to start this and for a about a year tried to get people to do it with me and finally one day I just made up my mind that I was going to do this. So I called and set up a meeting and I think they thought I was crazy or "what is the catch here, why does this woman want to do this." Somehow I knew I was supposed to do this and somehow it was the small way I could help. It was something I knew- soccer- and I knew I wouldn't be the best coach but I could get people excited. But I really had to work at it. But seeing those little kids faces and excitement and joy with themselves and that someone was actually "going to bat " for them was worth every minute. On the way home from the first little "game" we played when I asked the car full of kids what they had learned, one little kid piped up and said, "I learned to never give up - keep trying" I thought I would cry. The thought that had maybe been able to provide and opportunity for that child to learn that was again worth every minute.

THE COUNRTY DAY SCHOOL: RICHMOND, VA

We attended the school in Richmond from 1989-1996. During that time I

remember very little diversity in my school. I don't remember thinking that it was strange but I do remember feeling bad for the Black students in my class.

I especially remember the only Black girl in my grade. Her name is Betsy. She joined our class in 5th grade and while I think she had many friends and everyone really liked her I am not sure she ever felt that she fit in. Betsy was always invited to birthday parties but she never came. As far as I know no one was ever invited to her house either. For two years, we never knew where Betsy lived although we knew she didn't live in our neighborhoods. Once we took a trip to the Richmond Art Museum in a more urban part of the city. Betsy said look there is my house. It was a gorgeous, old town house on a beautiful tree lined street. My perception of Betsy really changed that day. She became less of a mystery and more or just another girl in our class. Until that point whenever I saw Black people in Richmond I assumed that they were poor. That day I thought to question that assumption.

In thinking back on the Country Day School, I realized that my memories are from a very young age, and I became curious as to how others viewed the school. I decided to interview a few of my teachers and ask them about diversity in the school and how the school helps to teach a multicultural curriculum despite a lack of diversity within the school. The interviews supported how I felt about the

school. The Country Day School was, and seems to still be a school that values respect, tolerance and honesty. The school relies very heavily on tradition, but a tradition that is about creating strong citizens in a global community. The teachers report that while the school is still not very successful at diversifying the student body they are trying very hard to diversify the faculty. When asked, "Do you feel that The Country Day School has become more diverse since I was there in the early 90s? If so what has led to the change? If not, what has discouraged that change? My 7th grade history teacher answered,

One obvious way is that there are more African-Americans on the faculty. I think when you were here, only Connor Williams (still here) was teaching. Today, we have two Black teachers in middle school, three in upper school, and three or four in lower school, though I only have one Black student this year, The Country Day School does make a concerted effort to find qualified minority students at every grade level. We are not very successful at this.

1. Each school division will provide clubs/activities focusing on education and inclusiveness.
2. Each school division will provide assembly programs, special events, and resources to increase student understanding of a variety of traditions, cultures, and religions.
3. Upper and Middle school student leaders, as well as k-12 faculty, will have more opportunities to learn about diversity and inclusion thru collaborating w/ diverse groups outside of The Country Day School.
4. Establish a parent advisory group to recruit prospective students and families.
5. Cultivate additional outreach opportunities and develop working relationships w/ local agencies and social/ religious organizations.

More specifically from the three teachers I put together a list of specific things

that the school does to facilitate this type of education. My 7th grade history teacher reminded me of the 7th grade curriculum that includes the holocaust, Japanese-American Internment, and civil rights. My 7th grade math teacher expressed the feeling that the school works to create socially responsible citizens by putting an important focus on community service.

Community service is scheduled into the 8th grade for two hours every Monday all Fall. The kids leave campus to go to various sites. It works out well. The school also has ties to an orphanage in Honduras where maybe a dozen kids go for a week each June with three faculty members. The 7th grade is tied in with Head Start programs in the area. And the upper school has a mandated number of community service hours the kids must complete each year. There is also an active Habitat for Humanity group that does some spring break work, I believe. Community service is everywhere. Even Sam (my 1st grader) and his class helped make Stone Soup (from the book) and they collected toys at Xmas.

While I know The Country Day School has made changes of the years, the descriptions bring back many memories of my time at the school. I was also involved in many community service projects and interesting curricular activities that focused on tolerance and social responsibility. However, what I didn't get from this school, my family or my neighborhood as a child in Richmond was exposure to difference as something that was normal. When I saw people of different races it was because they were coming to share cultural experiences with us or because we were going into the inner city to, "help them". I was almost never presented with someone of a different race as someone that I could have a significant relationship with. When that is the case it is inevitable that children will have stereotypes about other kinds of people, whether positive or negative.

Other kinds of people become a mystery instead of a reality. This changed for me the summer after 7th grade.

NORTHWEST SEATTLE ACADEMY: SEATTLE, WA

In 1996, when I was fourteen-years old, my family moved to Seattle, WA. My father was traveling to the West Coast for work and my mother was starting to feel trapped in Richmond. With so much family around and so many expectations, she didn't feel like she could be her true self. She wanted a new adventure and she wanted us all to gain a new perspective on the world.

In Seattle, my sisters and I attended a small private school in the northern part of the city. My older sister and I went to interview at the school the year before we moved. After our interview my dad took us to a teriyaki restaurant down the street. My sister and I both later expressed a feeling of complete fear of this little restaurant. It was an urban area that was much "dirtier" than the well-kept White picket fence neighborhood that we were used to. We ended up living about 10 blocks from this wonderful restaurant and it was a favorite lunch spot for our friends and at our new school. It is amazing how new experiences can have a great impact on how you perceive the world around you.

My first week of school I saw kids with body piercing, many different races, girls kissing girls, pro-choice buttons on backpacks, new accents and religious backgrounds and far more democrats than I had ever met before. I had moved from one of the most conservative cities in the country to one of the most

liberal cities. One might think that a move like this would be terrifying for a fourteen-year-old girl, but for me it was liberating. The excitement of all that was new and the chance to really figure out, who I wanted to be and how I wanted to deal with all this change was thrilling. I remember being surprised that Northwest Seattle Academy was constantly challenging the racism and lack of diversity that existed at the school. Through curriculum, forums and student voices we were constantly pushed to think about things in new ways and challenge what we saw around us. Tradition was not present at the school as it had been at The Country Day School and I remember thinking how could anyone think that this school is lacking in diversity? On the website, the school describes itself as,

An independent day school in Seattle's North End, Northwest Seattle Academy offers an academic program of outstanding quality guided by dedicated and innovative teachers. We attract talented students and involved families from throughout the Puget Sound area. Our program covers grades six through twelve with an integrated community service program, a global curriculum, and a commitment to diversity.

The mission statement is straightforward, "Northwest Seattle Academy is committed to developing each student's potential to become an intellectually courageous, socially responsible citizen of the world." In the next five years of my education, I saw this mission statement come to life. Of course I had my struggles in high-school like anyone does but I also feel that the move to Seattle and my time at Northwest Seattle Academy had a tremendous impact on the person I am today. In Seattle I became more confident, more outspoken, more passionate, more independent, more intellectually curious and more socially

responsible. I had many friends who challenged my views on the environment, politics, sexuality and race.

My first few months in Seattle I made some mistakes linguistically that got me into trouble. When something was not cool in Richmond we would say that it was “gay”. And instead of saying someone is Asian as I child I learned to call a person from Asia “Oriental”. In my first months at Northwest Seattle Academy I had friends pull me aside and explain why I shouldn’t use this type of language. Most memorably my friend Jess who is Chinese, very politely said to me, “Hey Abby, don’t say oriental, people from Asia like to be called Asians.” I was surprised at how gentle this reaction was. Jess didn’t criticize me or become offended. She seemed to understand that my ignorance was genuine and she took it upon herself to teach me.

By the time I graduated from high school I had formed relationships with a Black girl named Lilly, a girl of Chinese decent, Jess, numerous friends that classified themselves as gay, our gay Head of School Ron Baser, three gay teachers, two Asian teachers, many Jewish classmates, a few Muslim classmates, two German exchange students, one Japanese exchange student, Jon a very close friend whose mother is White and father is Black and a Black principal of an elementary school; she became an extremely important mentor to me. Of course many of my friends were White and many were not upper-middle class, but the relationships that I made allowed me to see some kinds of difference as normal. I

came to really value these new relationships.

I asked my sister, how did your views on race/ sexuality/class change when we moved to Seattle? She responded,

In Seattle I became more open minded. I think we all did. My friend Lori made the comment that "the world is bigger when you live in Seattle" when she moved out there from Virginia. I think I felt that way. I remember being struck by the number of "mixed" couples I saw in Seattle. Of course I became more open-minded about sexuality, for me that was just a matter of homosexuality loosing its mystery. I knew so many homosexuals, and they weren't weird, or funny, or gross, and so I got over it. I think that's the way most people "get over it"- by knowing people who are different really well.

A REFLECTION ON THE RECIPRICAL RELATIONSHIPS OF MY CHILDHOOD

In the interview I asked my mother, who at the time was a Republican, along with my father,

I believe that all of us are far more liberal than we would have been had we stayed in Richmond. From a political perspective, are there ways in which you feel that the move to Seattle was detrimental or different than the way you wanted to bring us up?

She replied: NO I do not think that being exposed to politically different views was bad at all. I believe that in order to be honest to yourself you need to look at lots of different views. It was our job (we felt) to encourage you to learn and explore different views and then to support what were honestly you—even if it was different from what we believed.

I also asked my sister: “Do you think that mom and dad have become more liberal since the move to Seattle? If so what do you think are the caused this shift?” She responded,

Yeah. I remember mom and dad going to out to dinner with Ron Baser's gay friends in Seattle, and loving it. Mom would never have done that when we first moved to Seattle. I don't really know how dad felt about homosexuality before we moved out here, but I know mom was pretty homophobic. Now she's not. I think her world became bigger too, and she had a lot of friends who were lesbians, and it became more normal.

My Grandfather and mother believed strongly in listening to community needs.

Despite being racist, my grandfather made a positive difference in his community.

He believed he could make a difference and he worked hard to do so. What is remarkable about my mother is that she took these same qualities, passion for community change, stubbornness and hard work, and did something with those qualities that my grandfather would not have. My mother had already moved to Seattle when she received a community award for her activism and work in Richmond. My grandfather was asked to accept the award for her. He did so very proudly. He really was her biggest fan and he became more open-minded as a result of her community efforts.

My mother's activism was not done on purpose to go against her family's history. She chose to work within the Black Community in Richmond because that is where she saw the most need. She chose to involve her children because she really believed that we needed to see her passionately involved in something and she wanted us all to be involved in something we could share. I have lists and list of shared community projects that my family has, all organized by my mother. They are not all related to race. They are all however all related to the community, the need she saw that she thought she could help fill.

My parents passed on this “see a need and do something about it” attitude. Most powerfully they did so in a way that made it seem so possible. My mother never seemed to be biting off more than she could chew. She did the little things and sometimes those little things turned into big things. Whether it was the in need Black Community in Richmond, the Red Cross, the Ronald McDonald House, or foster children that needed Christmas presents, my mother was involved. My mother needed help with these projects and she needed someone to talk to about them, because of this my sisters and I were also involved.

I asked my mother if encouraging us to be open-minded then stretched her to become more open-minded. She said that life is full of reciprocal relationships. If you teach your children to become honest, passionate and opening minded individuals, then as they grow up, the teacher becomes the learner and the process continues. She explained that she wanted all her relationships, including the relationships with her children to challenge her and she thinks we brought her further than she could ever imagine. She reminded me of a conversation I had with my father when I was in high school.

I was talking to my father on the way home from breakfast on a Saturday morning, just him and me. This Saturday I was flipping through the newspaper and we started talking about an article that was written on gays in the military. I was saying how ridiculous the debate was. My dad however replied by saying: “I know it isn’t politically correct for me to say that but if it makes people uncomfortable I don’t think they should allow it. The military

doesn't need something making it more complicated." Surprised by my dad's response, I thought for a minute and said: "Sometimes people have to be uncomfortable before they can change. What if someone said people of color shouldn't be allowed in the military because it made people uncomfortable. Where would we be then?" My dad said stubbornly, "I see your point but I think it is different."

I had a conversation with my mom later on that week and she commented on the conversation that my dad had told her about. She said that he was impressed with how I had made my point and it was maybe the first time I had pushed him to question a political view that he had. She talked about how much respect my dad had for the way in which I had stood up for my point of view. Of course my dad respected me before this but I think this was the point in our relationship in which I felt more like an adult and less like a child.

My sisters and I grew up hearing the story of Miss Rumphious – "The Lupine lady" we called her. This children's book by Barbara Cooney is the story of a little girl who sits on her grandfather's lap and says, "When I grow old I want to travel the world and live by the sea." Her grandfather replies, "That is all well in good but there is one more thing you must do. You must do something to make the world more beautiful." The little girl grows up and travels the world and lives by the sea and when she is very old she decides she is going to walk the countryside by where she lives sowing Lupine seeds. She does and when the next spring comes there are beautiful blue and purple and rose-colored flowers

everywhere. She then tells her granddaughter, who comes to sit on her lap and hear stories. The granddaughter tells her grandmother “I too want to travel to far away places and live by the sea.” The grandmother replies, “that is all well and good my dear but there is one more thing you must do, you must do something to make the world more beautiful.”

I feel as though this was the motto of my relationship with my mother. I saw my mother living this everyday. She wasn’t doing anything huge, maybe nothing more than planting some extra seeds for others to appreciate but, she was always playing her part and still is. At the end of my conversation with her, she said something that I think will stick with me for a long time.

You know Abby, I have never been able to believe in original sin. I just always wanted you guys and myself to know and look for the good in people not the bad. It is important to realize you can’t change everything. You can only do what you can do—what your talent is—and if you listen you will know that—but even very small things help in some many ways that we will never know.

When I left Seattle to go to college, I was on my own. However, I carried with me the lessons and values that my family had taught me. I never stopped thinking about what it was that I was going to do to make myself a better person and the world a better place.

WHITMAN COLLEGE: WALLA WALLA, WA

After I graduated from high school, I attended Whitman College in a small town about five hours away from Seattle. Whitman is not a very diverse college;

most of the student body is made up of liberal, White, North Westerners from upper-middle class families. I don't know that my racial identity developed in any specific ways while in college. In those four years I gained compassion for friends of color who often felt isolated in such a White small-town campus. I also wished that I could speak Spanish so that I could communicate with children in a Head Start classroom where I volunteered. Academically, Whitman offers many courses on race, race relations, culture and identity. I didn't take any of these classes. We did discuss race in many of the politics classes I took but those weren't the discussions that stuck with me when I left the classroom. College, for me, was about becoming independent, figuring out what I wanted to do for the next phase of my life and just living every day to the fullest. In a sense I took a break from thinking about race. I never realized this until just now but I think it is true and I think it is the perfect example of what it means to be White. When surrounded by so many people from a similar background as your own, it becomes a choice as to whether or not you think about race.

BANK STREET COLLEGE: NEW YORK, NY

When I moved to New York, this changed. I graduated from Whitman and came straight to New York to get my Masters in Education at Bank Street College. I am often asked why I would move across the country when there are plenty of wonderful Education schools on the West Coast. I reply that Bank Street is the best and I didn't want to pass up an opportunity to attend such progressive

and influential school. In addition, moving to New York was all about the challenge and the adventure. College was easy. It was academically rigorous, but overall the four years at Whitman were very comfortable years, where the only challenges I faced were staying up all night to write a paper that I didn't start early enough, learning to drink responsibly and occasional disagreements between friends. By the end of college I was ready for something new.

My first week in New York I took a nanny job on 120th street in Harlem. I arrived early for my interview and sat for about twenty minutes having a cup of coffee at a café on the corner. All of a sudden I felt very tall, very blonde and very White. My Whiteness became apparent to me in a way that it had never before. I looked around and saw no other White faces in the café, or outside on the sidewalk. I was uncomfortable. Despite my discomfort, I had no desire to get back on the subway and head downtown. It was a discomfort that felt right. I suddenly felt a rush of excitement. I now lived in a city where in parts of that city I was the minority. I knew that if I took this nanny position I would become more and more comfortable being in the minority in this particular neighborhood and I wanted that. It was a personal challenge that I was ready for.

For a year I spent my weekdays with this three-year-old girl living in Harlem. We hung out on the stoop, ate in the restaurants, went to the playgrounds and got to know many of the neighbors. At first I walked quickly through the neighborhood with my I-pod on to try to avoid the inevitable catcalls and comments about my Whiteness. Gradually as I became more comfortable and as

people started to recognize me this stopped. By the end of my year, I was still constantly aware of my Whiteness but the discomfort had completely faded. I know that my experience is drastically different than that of someone of color living in an area that is predominantly White but at the same time I do feel that this year of my life gave me a glimpse as to what it feels like to stand out because of the color of your skin. I was surprised that despite the friendliness and safety of the neighborhood I still at first felt discomfort just because I looked so different.

During my second year in New York, I stopped being a nanny because I was starting my student teaching. Throughout the year I was placed in four different schools. Each school was different and served a different population of children. I have decided to share two examples of ways that student teaching opened my eyes to cultural biases.

The second school where I was placed is in Inwood, a neighborhood in Northern Manhattan, with a large Dominican population. This wonderful small, public school is the loudest school I have ever been in on the inside. When I was first there I found myself constantly asking the children to speak quietly. I wondered how anyone could learn in an environment like that. As my time there progressed I realized that the Dominican teachers and parents were also very loud. It was not unusual for a parent to yell down the hall to another parent or for a teacher to simply walk in and interrupt another teacher's lesson. I came to realize

that the noise didn't bother anyone except me. It was my own cultural bias that schools should be quiet, kids should whisper and teachers should give each other space.

The children and I had to compromise to find a system that worked for all of us. The head teacher and I had a community discussion with the class. We decided that during certain times of the school day, when the teachers needed to work one-on-one with individual children, the rest of the class would make an extra effort to only whisper. As the teachers, we decided we would make an extra effort to not ask the students to lower their voices during snack, choice-time and while doing large group work. The compromise didn't go exactly as planned, but I think that both the teachers and the students felt better with a plan in place.

I moved from this 4th grade classroom to a Kindergarten classroom in Midtown Manhattan. In this classroom there were twelve children whose first language was not English and among those twelve, ten different languages were represented. Needless to say, the school is very diverse. In this classroom I think I unfortunately slipped into my colorblind mode. During this time I was in a graduate class about observing and recording in the classroom. I was practicing in the kindergarten classroom and chose to observe Jay, a Korean boy. Jay has a very difficult time speaking in front of the class and has a very quiet, obedient temperament. At the end of the course I presented my observations on Jay to the Bank Street class. I wondered why Jay wasn't more comfortable in the classroom. My classmates commented that his nature might be due to the cultural background. Quite honestly I had not considered that his behavior was due to

cultural expectations at home. I realized that there could be many different factors affecting Jay's behavior, but it was important that I not overlook culture.

In addition to these eye-opening experiences, New York has made difference even more normal than it was in Seattle. The concept of shared space on the crowded streets, public transportation and apartment buildings forces people to recognize the diversity that exists in the city. Different people, restaurants, cultural events, holidays and museums have opened my eyes to the benefits of living in such a multicultural city.

Within the classroom, Bank Street does not reflect the diversity of New York City. At first this didn't surprise me; I am used to being in class with primarily White middle-class classmates. As I continued my coursework, I realized two things. First, there was diversity at Bank Street. It may not be initially apparent but students here come from different parts of the country, have different family backgrounds, religious beliefs and values. At the same time, it would have been nice to have a greater number of students who had different perspectives on race and class.

Despite the lack of diversity, Bank Street encouraged me to think about children as unique individuals, recognizing their strengths and using those strengths to help develop their needs. My courses taught me the importance of community in the classroom and how to find a universal design to include all students in that community. My student teaching provided me with concrete examples of progressive teaching practices and more importantly gave me the

confidence to know that I will be able to implement these ideas in my own classroom. My entire Bank Street experiences reminded me repeatedly to be self-reflective, to constantly question and to advocate for what I believe.

CONCLUSIONS

These different pieces of my life, have all contributed in important ways, to who I am today and what I will bring with me to the classroom where I will teach next year. The act of putting these memories and reflections down on paper has made me aware of how they all fit together to influence my life. I have picked out five trends/lessons that are important to me that I see coming out of these reflections. I understand that as I continue to grow as a teacher and woman many of my opinions will change but, I feel that many of the core values I have recognized in this document will remain.

1. I have many cultural biases. These biases will remain a part of me unless I am actively aware that they exist and proactive in making a change. In the classroom I need to be constantly analyzing my own thought processes to raise awareness of these biases.

2. My family culture is very important to who I am. My life shows many similarities to that of my grandfather and my mother. I should be proud of where I come from. I can't teach what I don't know and if I am not proud of parts of my background and willing to share this pride, how can I teach the children in my classroom to be proud of where each one of them comes from. Recently in a

course that I was taking, I was lost when asked to define my culture and identity. I didn't know what to say. But now, thinking about it again, I would define myself as a product of my family, my education and the geographic locations where I have lived. I come from honesty and responsibly, southern cooking, passion for community change, Seattle weather, confidence to accept the challenge at hand. There are many pieces of who I am that I am proud of and that I can share with children in my classroom.

One exercise I hope to do with my students is called "I am from..." The students write a "poem" about different aspects of where they are from. I have seen classes do it before and the children usually included, food, phrases, and values of their home lives. I attempted to think about what one of these poems about my life would look like:

I WAS FROM
Linen pants, SUVs and White picket fences
Those who work hard are rewarded
Privilege: Enjoy it your family earned it
This is how life is
"Tell'em who you really are"
There is one right way of doing things

I AM FROM
Blue jeans, fleeces and running shoes
Privilege: You have the power and ability to make a difference
How could life be?
A person's background should not solely determine their future
"You can only do what you can do—what your talent is—and if you listen you will know that—but even the small things help in so many ways that we will never know."

Part of my cultural background is also the sense of community that I grew up with. Whether through community service, family, or relationships with teachers, I always felt the need to be an active part of a community where I was forming reciprocal relationships with those around me. I decided to take this position at the public school in the South Bronx for many reasons. One of the most important reasons is that they hired one of my classmates and friends who has similar teaching practices. Having this relationship will give me support and additional sense of community.

3. Similar to my mother and grandfather, I love a challenge. In thinking back on my childhood, my move to Seattle, and my move to New York, it is clear to me that when presented with an opportunity to do something challenging I tend to approach it with excitement and determination to succeed. My mother and grandfather also approached parts of their lives with this same determination. One thing that I think will make me a successful teacher next year is that I view the year as a challenge and I am determined to succeed. Knowing this about myself reminds me of how important it is for me to be careful how I define success. I will have setbacks next year, there are things that won't go smoothly and I need to make sure that I don't allow these setbacks to make me lose confidence in who I am as a person and teacher.

4. While attending the Country Day School, I learned a tremendous amount about honesty, responsibility and giving back to the community. These values laid a framework for me to become a more open-minded individual. I didn't however become more open-minded until moving to Seattle, where certain kinds of diversity were normal. For me it has been diversity as a part of my everyday life both in Seattle and now in New York that makes the greatest impact on making me more culturally sensitive and aware. The school where I will be teaching next year has certain types of diversity but it is also relatively homogenous, Black and Hispanic children all from the same neighborhood. It will be a challenge to continually try to highlight the diversity that does exist and as much as possible make difference normal for my students.

5. Most importantly this reflection has made me realize the importance of reciprocal relationships in which even between generations, learners become teachers and teachers become learners. This is apparent in my mother and grandfathers relationship and in my relationship with my mother. Next year I hope to form a relationship with each one of my students in which our interactions will teach me not only about culture and family but about what it means to be a learner, a child, and part of the classroom. Their strengths, needs, and cultural backgrounds with hopefully become a constant inspiration for how I develop curriculum and build community within the classroom.

AND FINALLY

This is step number one. I have decided that the next step in preparing myself for next year is to compile a list of both teacher and student resources to help facilitate discussions about culture, diversity and community with my second graders next year. I am sure that as I become a seasoned teacher, I will add quite a bit to this list but for now Appendix 1 provides bibliography of books that I will have in my classroom this fall. I hope these books will help keep issues of diversity at the forefront of my curriculum and classroom community.

Appendix 1: Resources for Creating a Classroom that Celebrates Diversity

Picture Books

- Ada, A.F. (2002). *I love Saturdays y Domingos*. New York: Athenaeum Books for Young Readers.
- Banks, K. (2000) *The night worker*. New York: Frances Foster Books.
- Carter, D. (1998). *Bye, mis' Lela.*. New York: Frances Foster Books.
- D'Arc, K. (2001) "*My grandmother is a singing Yaya.*" New York: Orchard Books.
- Dooley, N. (1996) *Everybody bakes bread*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Inc.
- Dooley, N. (1991) *Everybody cooks rice*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Inc.
- Dorros, A. (1991) *Abuela*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.
- English, K. (1999) *Nadia's hands*. Honesdale, PN: Boyds Mills Press.
- Friedman, I. (1984) *How my parents learned to eat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Hall, B. (2004) *Henry and the kite dragon*. New York: Philomel Books.
- Hamanaka, S. (1995) *Be bop-a-do-walk*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Hamanaka, S (1994) *All the colors of the earth*. New York: Morrow Junior Books.
- Ho, M. (1996) *Hush!*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Hoffman, M. (1991) *Amazing grace*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Hoffman, M (2002) *The color of home*. New York: Phyllis Fogelman Books.

- Ingis, T. (1992) *When I was little*. Orange, NJ: Just Us Books.
- Katz, K. (1999) *The colors of us*. New York: Holt.
- Keats, E. (1967) *Peter's chair*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Low, W. (1997) *Chinatown*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Parr, T. (2001) *It's okay to be different*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Patrick, D. (1993) *The car washing street*. New York: Tambourine Books.
- Patrick, D. (1993) *Red Dancing Shoes*. New York: Tambourine Books.
- Pham, L. (2005) *Big sister, little sister*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Polacco, P. (1990) *Babushka's doll*. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for young readers.
- Polacco, P. (1992) *Mrs. Katz and Tush*. New York: A Bantam Little Rooster Book.
- Wells, R. (1998) *Yoko*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Williams, V. (2001) *Amber was brave, Essie was smart*. New York: Greenwillow Books.
- Williams, V. (1982) *A chair for my mother*. New York: Greenwillow Books.
- Woodson, J. (2004) *Coming home soon*. New York: G.P Putnam's Sons.
- Woodson, J. (2001) *The other side*. New York: G.P Putnam's Sons.
- Woodson, J. (2002) *Our Gracie Aunt*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Wong, J. (2002) *Apple pie 4th of July*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc.
- Young, E. (2006) *My Mei-Mei*. New York: Philomel Books.

Teacher Resources

- Ana, O (2004) *Tongue-Tied: the lives of multilingual children in public education*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Bynes, D and Gary Kiger. (2005) *Common bonds: anti-bias teaching in a diverse society*. Olney, MD: ACEI.
- Davis, B. (2006) *How to teach students who don't look like you*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Eldridge, D. (1998) *Teacher Talk: Multicultural lesson plans for the elementary classroom*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Nieto, S. (2004) *Affirming diversity*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Neito, S. (2003) *The light is their eyes: creating multicultural learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ramsey, Patricia G. and Sparks, Louise Derman. *What if all the kids are white? : Anti-bias multicultural Education with children and Families.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press
- Sparks, Louise Derman.(1989) *Anti Bias Curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Winston, L. (1997) *Keepsakes: using family stories in elementary classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH.

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