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A Mile in My Shoes

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My childhood was filled with rules and regulations set by my parents. The other kids I knew who were not raised in African American households did not have the same rules. As Clint Smith explains in his TED Talk, “How to Raise a Black Son in America”: “My parents raised me and my siblings in an armor of advice, an ocean of alarm bells, so someone wouldn’t steal the breath from our lungs, so that they wouldn’t make a memory of this skin, so that we could be kids, not casket or concrete.” This is the same message my parents sent me, and it has resonated with ever since.

Throughout my eighteen years on this planet, I have faced adversity. I am an African-American male who attended predominantly white schools until high school. All throughout these years I stood out because I was involved in the Talented and Gifted (TAG) and Honors programs. As a very young child, I was oblivious to racial matters, but I learned rather quickly that African-American boys were treated differently than other kids. In kindergarten, my best friend at the time had his birthday coming up, and I wanted to go. I knew that birthdays were important occasions. His birthday passed over the weekend, and at school the following week I was confused and asked, “Why didn’t I get to come?” He replied, “My mom said people like you were not allowed to come.” Not understanding the situation, I went home and told my mom what had said to me. My mom sat me down, and, at the age five, I learned what racism was. I cried because I was different and people didn’t like me just because of that.

In school, it soon became tough for me because I felt that my teachers were targeting me. I was a smart African-American boy in a top public school, but it seemed like my teachers didn't want to see me succeed and were mad that I was doing well. In 5th grade, I caught a teacher that would take random points off assignments I turned in, and when I confronted her about it, she couldn’t explain it, and then dismissed me for being disrespectful. The teachers would often send me to the principal’s office for no reason, or sit me outside the class with a worksheet to complete while they instructed the class. I had no other option but to teach myself the material. These experiences left me baffled. Why was a boy as young as I not being helped by his teachers? Why were they singling me out and treating me differently? I was not the perfect student, but that was no reason to put a kid in the hallway to teach himself.

As I matured, my anger and frustration toward this kind of treatment settled down, and I just focused on my grades. By the end of middle school, I figured out that my way of getting back at my teachers was to excel in my studies, something I felt they were trying to prevent me from doing. I was able to stay positive with the help of certain people who cared for me. In elementary school it was the nurse; in middle school it became the assistant principal (he was also African-American); and in high school, it was Mr. Granville and Ms. Williams. These teachers soon became my network of support, and I relied heavily on them throughout my

education. They helped me stay on the right track and also stay out of trouble, which, in turn, led me to achieve good grades.

In one instance, there had been a fight in a bathroom while I was in study hall doing work. Afterwards, my friend and I decided to use the bathroom and this male teacher watched us go in. When we left the bathroom, he made us stand on this wall and questioned us for thirty minutes about the fight. My anger continued to rise, especially after he let a white boy come in and then leave the bathroom without questioning him. This act enraged me, and I started to lose my composure. Then suddenly, Ms. Williams called out my name, and hearing the familiar sound soothed my anger. Without my network of support, my time during school would have been far more challenging; they helped me to deal with the racism, and showed me that the best way to retaliate was to succeed.

Apart from school, there were also challenges in my home life. I grew up in Roswell, a great, safe city of around 200,000 people. My parents only wanted the best for me, and from a very young age, they taught me to respect my elders. My dad is a perfectionist and doesn't like when things are not how he wants them to be. Everything is done his way, and if it wasn't, then you were in trouble. He has a very controlling personality that I have unfortunately inherited (but at least I can acknowledge mine). The most recent gut-wrenching thing my dad has said to me was: "You aren't going to do shit with your life"—all over a tattoo. This statement hit home with me because something like a tattoo should not define me as a person, say what I am going to do with my life, or measure my worth. A message like this should not come from a parent, whose role is to encourage you and support you. Strangely, though, his statement has inspired me more than anything, even the punishments I received as a kid.

Like many kids, I was spanked when I did something wrong, but that was only one part of the punishment. The rest was more along the lines of life in prison. I would be put into my room for hours at a time, which my dad told me was "solitary confinement." I wasn't allowed to leave to do anything until my dad said it was okay, not even come out to eat. This isolation made me value the people I came into contact with daily and also made me value the relationships I built. I think the experience also contributed to my talkative personality. Even though they were borderline torturous to endure, these punishments made me think a lot about where I wanted to be in life. They gave me a sense of how it would be if I went to jail and made me promise myself I never would. Because of these experiences, I have tried my best to stay out of any situation that could compromise my freedom.

As a kid, I knew I needed to find a more productive way to use my time, and that is when I found sports. Sports were very impactful for me. They gave me a sense of purpose, aided my ability to work in a team, and boosted my self-esteem. My dad, in my eyes, always had a tendency to find the wrong in whatever I did, but my coaches saw the value I was bringing. Another way sports boosted my self-

esteem is by getting me into shape and allowing me to develop more confidence in myself. Working out and playing sports proved vital in making me happy, and the gym became my sanctuary—a little paradise to cope with the troubles I had at home.

Eventually, I figured out a way to get out of my house and live a better life without the stress of my dad. Education was the answer to all my problems. If I got good grades, I could go anywhere; they were my key to escaping the claws of my father. The only issue with this is that I hated studying, and I was always too tired when I got home from sports to do my homework. I needed to devise a plan of how to succeed and fast. So I started doing my homework in the free time I had at school. This allowed me to focus on sports then relax when I got home, which made my life so much better. I had minimal stress because all my work was already completed.

So at this point, you may be wondering, how'd you handle all this—the discrimination at school, the expectations of my dad, the challenges of balancing school work with sports? My answer is my mom. She is my everything. I lean on her so much, mainly because I know she has my back, and loves me so much. She knows a lot about me, and I confide in her. I changed my behavior, got better grades, and got a job to provide for myself because of her. I always look to do my best just so that my mom will be proud to look at me and say, “That's my son.” She is my driving force and always has the best intentions for me. Sometimes she can be a bit stuck in her beliefs, but I love how supportive she is in everything I do.

Another constant source of support is a man named Ned Granville. He was my 9th grade Honors Biology teacher, and he has been the biggest help through my educational path. He always knew how to deliver the information in a way that I could understand when he taught me, and even when he wasn't my teacher, I went to him with questions. Besides the academic help he offered, he would help me with regular problems. I could vent to him like I could one of my peers, without censoring anything. This form of communication we shared was unparalleled by any other teacher I have ever had. We have an ongoing relationship and stay in contact through Facebook.

The last of my fantastic resources is my basketball coach, Charlie Wood. Coach Wood was the greatest coach that I ever had. He made me feel needed and essential on his basketball team. He also challenged me because he knew my potential. We became great friends because he would poke fun at me, and I would do the same to him. I was also able to be his teacher assistant during school. He let me do almost anything. I was able to leave school early on most days, except when he wasn't there. Being his assistant also gave me ample time to talk to him, which was great because I was always able to tell him about what is going on in my life. Coach Wood was always very laid back, and also very blunt with what he has to say. That is a rare quality that I find valuable, and he has become both a friend and

an authority figure in my life.

Everyone's path is different. Everyone has the ups, the downs, the bumps, and the turns that shape their lives. The challenges that one faces along the way, although significant, do not define the life one will live. The pathway one travels simply creates the shell of who one will be; it is the individual's job to fill that shell with things of value. I've always lived by the saying: "Find your paradise." To me, this means find what makes you happy. Once you lock into what makes you happy, it's time to go and chase it. Hopefully, in the end, the path traveled leads to happiness, and everything you had to endure along the way will seem worth it; for those things in the past that you conquered make you into a stronger human being.