

Lifespan Paper

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The arrival of my presence was introduced to the world on July 28, 1981, in the Bronx, NY. If you're a lover of history, you'll know the wedding of Prince Charles (later King Charles III) and Lady Diana Spencer took place on Wednesday, 29 July 1981, hence my name was chosen amongst the hoopla of British royalty. My parents were in their late thirties and already had what was considered a "typical American family" (mom, dad, daughter, and son) before I came along.

According to my mother, I reached all the motor skill milestones (sitting at 4-5 months, crawling by six months, walking on my own before my 1st birthday) quite easily. The fact I have two older siblings probably helped this process along as I was treated as their new toy. They recall sitting me up to watch TV, read or show me books in my early stages. The one memory they both have is holding me by my hands and running around the apartment to get me to walk sooner, as they were always looking for entertainment and wanted me to grow up faster.

When it comes to socioeconomic status, the Bronx has the highest rate of poverty in New York City, and the greater South Bronx is the poorest area. Even though I grew up in the South Bronx, I didn't feel like a poor child. That's a testament to my parents as I did not yearn for most things other than the typical things children my age wanted (every toy we saw on television). My friends were already telling me "I'm rich" since I went to catholic school, even though we lived in the same neighborhood and parents had similar jobs.

There was much publicized violence in the area, but I didn't know anything about it since the neighborhood kept children away from those negative elements. There wasn't an increase in aggression for children associated with growing up in poverty areas. Boys were their usual rambunctious selves and played games (tag, manhunt, hide-and-go-seek, etc....) to channel their

energies. When opportunities to participate in structured events (team sports, Fresh Air Fund, plays,) presented themselves, neighborhood children were usually involved.

Stereotypes happen throughout life. The first encounter I can recall happened in high school. Being a member of the freshman football team, teachers already had students pegged as troublemakers and below average students before a week of classes even commenced. Obviously, this was due to the upperclassmen football players not leaving an pleasant memories or situations for certain teachers in school. Simply asking a classmate “what page are we on” elicited a strong rebuke from a teacher during class. Granted people have bad days, but to single out the same person or people when things aren’t going their way during a lesson as an authority figure is childish. It took two years, witnesses, and some intervention from administration to stop the teachers (adults) from discriminating against football players (teenage students) in the classroom.

The labeling continued into college. Going to a predominately white institution (PWI), students already were guessing what sport I played due to be black/African-American or whatever the appropriate title is/was. The underlying impression of guessing the sport I played meant I was on scholarship (the school didn’t give out football scholarships) and that was the only reason I was at the school. I took a medical redshirt my freshman year, so I didn’t initially mingle with the players on the team, so I wasn’t seen as a “jock” my freshman year. This didn’t stop people for mistaking me for another teammate even though we looked nothing alike (except being black) and told all football players want to do is have sex with as many women as possible (I was a virgin) on campus. I guess thanks to television shows and/or movies, some students had their preconceived notions about who I was before having a meaningful conversation or at least hanging out with me before forming an opinion.

The teachers' attitudes toward the student-athletes were hit or miss. When I finally participated on the team starting my sophomore year, I had to travel to play a few games and miss classes. When going over the syllabus, my teammates and I let the professors know the weeks were going to miss class due to games. Some professors were happy for the early communication to address anything that might be a disruption to the flow of the class due to projects or tests. Other professors thought we were looking for preferential treatment by informing them about conflicts. They took that time to lecture us about the importance of classroom attendance and participation as if we made the NCAA schedule to interrupt their class schedule.

The other outlandish statement I heard during college was "you're probably here due to affirmative action." Implying I was only in school due to being an athlete or affirmative action was insulting, prejudice, and racist. I didn't pay these people any mind as they were ignorant and came from sheltered backgrounds. Thankfully, I was informed before coming on campus, some people might have these notions in college, and it wasn't my place to attempt to educate or engage them. Instead of being quiet, they would sometimes persist with more quotes of "I can't be racist as I have a black friend" and "it's well known not many black people go to college." I've come to learn these statements are now termed microaggressions.

The term white privilege wasn't around when I was attending college. Some white students automatically assumed my attendance at college was at the cost of some other white student who was "more qualified" to be there than I was. As previously mentioned, the college didn't give out football scholarships so I had to get into the school on my own merit. The other institutions I applied to accepted me and the main reason I attended my alma mater was due to financial aid package being the best for myself regarding the minimal loans. The irony is two of

these people spoke about different internships, graduating, and getting jobs once their four years were done, but they failed out of college while I graduated. Their perceived white privilege probably allowed them to become comfortable during their respective freshman and sophomore years as if all they had to do was show up on campus and receive their degrees four years later.

Privilege extended to the benefit of doubt when dealing with legal situations as well on campus. A white person gets into a fight on campus, and it wasn't punished harshly by the administration. A black college student protected themselves from an aggressive verbal and physical altercation instigated by white male, but the white male called the police at the student was arrested. The school wanted to throw the student out, but the student had a lawyer and witness (campus security) and the college quickly relented from their prior intentions of expulsion.

The target of oppression and life lesson happened when the local police decided to question and then bring in my roommate due to the make and model of his car being involved in a crime. He had a solid reason and alibi for he was at the time they were asking of his whereabouts (the library studying for class with a group). Unfortunately, one of our dormmates was scared of the police and when asked was he with you in the library, LIED and said "I don't know where he was officer." The police asked him if he would mind going to the precinct for questioning and without knowing any better agreed as he was innocent, had other witnesses to verify where he was along with library videotaped evidence of his whereabouts. We learnt later from campus security (former police officers) that while my friend was at the precinct, they had him in a two-way interview room (mirror on inside so one can't see out with viewers on the outside), with the victim of the crime attempting to identify his assailant. The police kept insisting it was my roommate who robbed the assailant as his car matched exactly what the

victim said it was. Thankfully, the victim told the truth even after repeated attempts by the local police to implicate my roommate. We learnt from campus security that day that even if you're innocent of ANY wrongdoing, do not under any circumstances volunteer to go to the police station or be part of a lineup (even if they pay you). Thanks to the internet and overturned cases from the Innocence Project, we know the history of police being able to lie and do almost anything within their power to get a case closed, whether a person or people are innocent or not. It's up to the citizens to know their rights and not put themselves in those situations to be victims of police coercion, especially when they are black as history shows black males are, unfortunately, disproportionately targeted by police for transgressions. Believe or not, being raised in NYC, police officers speaking to my elementary school class about the police being "your friends" and you have nothing to fear if your innocent" made me feel safe. After the interactions by the police officers and my college friends in a small town, changed my whole perspective.

Repeatedly being a target of institutional oppression during college opened my eyes. The campus and town were a microcosm of what the "real world" might be (most people don't look like you, understand your culture or have deep seated stereotypes about you based on tv or limited access to people such as yourself). Microaggressions such as being followed around in the tiny bookstore by an employee asking if I need help, but not asking anyone else in the store, was nuts. The usual microaggression of "are you sure you're from the Bronx? You speak so well." Women clutching their purses in board daylight as I'm walking to 9:30AM class as I pass by them was/is crazy.

I had male privilege go my way for a class. I did less work for a paper than a woman in class (who I also had college writing with) and received better grade. I read her paper and it was

better than mine. She followed the instructions to the “t” and had better sources, but somehow received a B+, while I received an A-. It wasn’t right. The older, retiring professor seemed to be a nice person, but his grading scale was disproportionate when grading papers for males and females in the class. I do know the young lady went to her freshman advisor to make it known her papers were not graded fairly. The head of the science department read her papers, backed her claims, and improve her grades to the proper letter grades.

There were allies who helped by being themselves. The president of the college was a kind person. He wasn’t colorblind and knew there was diversity issue on campus. He would repeatedly go out of his way to speak to students of color around campus to ask us what was going on without lives and studies. He annually held lunches for the students of color to see what he and the administration can do to make things more comfortable for us on campus. I’m not naïve. He also had to ensure the business of the college stayed afloat and attracting more minorities to campus would help in marketing and the college’s bottom line. The college president spoke to faculty to see if there was anything he could do the minorities on campus. This wasn’t a onetime thing. He’d repeatedly ask his staff and advisors their opinions for what they could do to help students, just in case the students were too shy to tell him their thoughts when they spoke with him.

Of course, there were students that were allies as well. One friend asked her roommate, “why are you staring at him?” Her roommate from Vermont didn’t have much exposure to black people and was intrigued about the texture of my hair. This led to conversations about backgrounds, city vs town life, the importance of lotion for skin protection. This innocent conversation on various topics eventually led to race. She didn’t know much about black or Hispanic (my friend, her roommate) people except for what she saw on television (Jennifer

Lopez, Fresh Prince, Sister-Sister and music videos), Martin Luther King, a few she students she saw at the mall who went to University of Vermont. She read about racism and her parents told her were all the same. She even helped prove a point at the bookstore. While I was being followed around the bookstore (microaggression), she calmly grabbed a hoodie, a water bottle and two keychains located on the counter and proceeded to walk out of the bookstore without anyone saying a peep to her. She went to the store manager and told him the store had racist policies (it was cool and funny at the same time) and showed him how her small frame carried out all of aforementioned items out the front door of the store without paying or being stopped by employee. She pointed out no one asked her if she needed help or followed her around the store, but immediately asked me if I need assistance and that they were around the area if I needed anything. The manager thanked her for her honesty and said he would do a better job of having the staff attend to every patrons needs (just not their policy of following around minorities in the bookstore).