

Monday, November 15, 2004: Heather Jenkins '90, Diversity Coordinator

The year was 1984, and as far as I knew I was black. Although I clearly understood that my mother was white, I considered myself to be a black female. Because of my white, middle-class upbringing, all of my friends were and for the most part have always been white. I attended the same school from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, at which point my mother decided to send me to a new school for seventh and eighth grade. I was relieved that my new friends didn't seem to mind my blackness. In retrospect I sense that many of them knew, or at least believed that I was not "fully" black long before I did.

A few months into my seventh grade year, three dark skinned girls verbally thrashed me while I sat in the lonely, gray cafeteria. Questions about my fashion sense, hairstyle, speech, and choice of companions spewed from their mouths. Before I could answer they declared that given my mother's appearance--blonde hair, faux fur coat, and pearls--and all of the aforementioned offenses that I was not in actuality black that I must be "mixed."

What in the world did it mean to be mixed? How did they know things about me that I had not yet recognized? Why didn't I hear this troubling news from one of my favorite teachers or one of my family members? Trauma set in. I had no contact with my African American biological father or his family after my parents divorced nine years earlier. Truth be told, my separation from this side of my family came quite some time before the legality commenced. My mother's white, European family failed to address my race or theirs. Consequently, I was left with an incomplete, inaccurate self-portrait. I knew that

in every family picture I stood out like a black sheep in a sea of white wool. As far as I was concerned there was only black and white, and I was certainly not the latter. All of my friends confirmed my racial beliefs about myself by presumptuously and consistently referring to me as their “black friend”. My biracial status was a constant, gnawing source of frustration from this point on. Exhaustive explanations would be necessary to satisfy the curiosity of others.

The year was 1988, and I was nearing the end of my sophomore year of high school. I pondered the words of peers and adults not yet able to discern their meaning. Racial intricacies during elementary, middle and high school with “white” people had been so subtle that it took years for me to recognize, verbalize, and analyze them. Words and actions that I deemed innocent and meaningless at the time, later proved to be damaging and fraught with meaning. I was refined and well spoken; I was the person that I had learned to be. During these years, well-bred friends and their parents as well as some of my teachers politely remarked that they did not think of me as black; that I was different than other black people. Because of my background, manner, speech, and education, I did not fit into their image and idea of what defined a black person; I was the exception. These assertions proved to be rather harmful in later years, and conformity became my closest friend.

The year was 1990, and once again I was forced to grapple with my racial identity. Naively, I believed that university life held contentment and serenity, a place of rest for my troubled self-image. While I chatted with some friends who were, of course,

white, a black student cornered me and asked, "What are you?" Did she not see that I was a human being? My only response was to stare at her like a deer caught in the headlights. After looking me up and down in the most insolent manner, she decided that I must be "mixed" given my light skin and smooth hair. Although I was shocked at the ill-informed, prejudicial judgment, I was better prepared than the first time. However, I found myself dreadfully unequipped for what transpired. A black, male student joined this girl and together they thoughtlessly concluded that I was not only a traitor to African-Americans, but also a racist. Fall, spring, and summer of that school year passed as I tried, unsuccessfully, to reconcile the feelings of shame and self-loathing that were thrust upon me. Questions about racial superiority and inferiority filled my muddled head. Did I hate black people? Was I distancing myself from blacks intentionally? Did the white people that surrounded me feel that I was better than other blacks because of my white, middle class background?

I often thought about the adults in my life that allowed me, and actually taught me, to be ashamed of and at times reject parts of my identity. I learned by their silence and omission to negate half of myself. I firmly believe that the adults in my life had good intentions, and simply were not aware of the negative long-term effects that their behavior would have on my self-esteem and self-image. They did not realize that when I looked in the mirror I was confused and dejected by the unfamiliar, unwelcome reflection.

After the births of my daughters in 1997 and 1998, I began to investigate not only my character but also our society's social construction of race, power, and privilege. What did it mean that white people did not think of me as a black person? What did that belief reveal about their opinion of blacks? Why were the black people around me scornful of any black person who appeared to be accepting of what they perceived as white middle class American culture? Where does someone of mixed racial and ethnic heritage fit into a racially stratified social structure? I began an emotional journey through my past to explore my present and my daughters' future.

It is 2004, and I have turned what was an ugly, uncomfortable time in my life into personal, professional, and academic achievement. Many years of long hard self study have generated healing and happiness. I forced myself to look at the messages that I had been sent about race in our society. I learned from various adults and children, black and white, family, friends and foes that race does indeed matter. I learned that the "raceless" persona that I adopted to protect myself during my youth hindered my ability to grow, develop, and evolve as a person. I learned that race and status are interconnected to a certain degree in our culture. I learned about covert, subtle discrimination and overt, blatant discrimination; I learned that the former is no less destructive than the latter. I also learned, and had to acknowledge that being mixed or biracial privileged me as much as it tormented me. I learned that these are truths not excuses; I can and must shape my own future. Along the way, I discovered the belief that I am morally and ethically obligated to teach not only my own children, but also any children that are in my charge, to nurture and cultivate a clear, confident, whole self.

I questioned my open mindedness as I pondered the words of the students at U of R. Although I did not, and do not believe that I am a racist; I have had to accept that some of my action, attitudes, and behaviors may have projected an air of superiority. The words “you are different from other blacks” translated to “you are better than other blacks.” All that I had seen and heard about blacks in America bled into my self identification and my socialization patterns. I cannot change the way that I may have behaved or those that I may have excluded, nor can I adjust the attitude and image that I may have put forth, but I can, and have learned from my self exploration. As strange as it may seem, I am thankful to that arguably cruel girl at U of R for the “wake-up call”. Had her words not been so brazen, had they not fallen so heavily on my head and heart, I may not have come to terms with many of the inconsistencies in my life, and I may not have found answers to some of the questions that plagued my mind and stunted my growth.

The past 7 years have been flooded with reflection, self-hate, self-doubt, analysis, examination, reconciliation, and finally, empowerment. I am able to use my life lessons to become a better person, and a better parent. I have spent the past four years researching and studying diversity and multiculturalism as they relate to education, identity development, as well as inter and intra-group relations. I have found a deep, unrelenting passion for psychology, sociology, and anthropology as I have surrounded myself with literature and conversations that have nurtured my love for teaching and learning. Along the way, I found not only “what I want to be when I grow-up”, but most importantly I found the pieces of myself that had been lost, the pieces of my self that I had cast aside as

they caused me great embarrassment, the pieces of my self that I now cling to as they make me who I am: a mother, a student, a teacher, a person who is finally happy to be exactly who and what she is, a person with uncompromising enthusiasm to unleash the power of self-discovery, the sheer power of learning.

The most valuable insights that I have learned about the world, others, and myself, has been through informative, dynamic, respectful conversations with people who are different I am; people whose backgrounds, frames of reference, perspectives, and ideologies are drastically different than my own. This has caused me to challenge the rightness of my own beliefs and kept my open to and interested in diverse opinions, thoughts, and views. Tomorrow is SUMA's first Mix-It-Up at lunch of the year. Please use this opportunity as a starting point for your own self study, a point where you embrace someone new, someone different, a point where you challenge yourself and those around you. It was truly my pleasure to share these pieces of myself with you this morning, thank you all for your time.