

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, *“There is no easy way to create a world where men and women can live together, where each has his own job and house and where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb. But if such a world is created in our lifetime, it will be done in the United States by Negroes and white people of good will. It will be accomplished by persons who have the courage to put an end to sufferings by willingly suffering themselves rather than inflict suffering upon others. It will be done by rejecting the racism, materialism, and violence that has characterized Western civilization and especially by working toward a world of brotherhood, cooperation, and peace.”* Has Dr. King's dream been fulfilled? Has our society truly overcome the many hurdles of racial discrimination? Have we moved beyond judging people by superficial standards based on race? Society may say racial inequality has been overcome by equal opportunity such as affirmative action. As we look around, there are successful African Americans such as Barack Obama, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Michael Jordan, and Oprah Winfrey in all aspects of our society from politics to science to sports to entertainment, and everywhere in between. The success stories of most of these individuals cannot take away from the hardships and struggles they had to face. In many instances, this discrimination still prevails even though they have become successful. Our current president, Barack Obama, has been in office for almost two terms, yet people still challenge almost every aspect of his life from his birth certificate to his nationality. In contrast to former presidents who were addressed as “Mr. President,” our current president is commonly referred to as “Obama” by many media sources. In addition, many citizens criticize his political decisions and feel that he is not worthy of their respect which is likely based on his skin color and not his potentials as a leader. This is not unique to President Barack Obama alone. Lavern Whisenton-Davidson's experiences as an African American are very similar.

Dr. Lavern Whisenton-Davidson has been a professor in the department of biology at Millersville University for nearly 30 years. She is a very accomplished professor who is well respected by her students and colleagues. Lavern Whisenton-Davidson still remembers the struggles that she

faced growing up as an African American. One of the events that impacted her life as a young child was when she had to change schools from a segregated school to a desegregated school. Dr. Whisenton-Davidson also remembers how her life was affected as the civil rights act was better implemented. Though she is not well known like other civil rights activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ruby Bridges, or Rosa Parks, her story deserves to be heard.

Whisenton-Davidson was born in St. Louis, Missouri to a middle class family consisting of seven boys and two girls. Her father had to drop out of high school to do sharecropping to support his family of 19, including his parents and siblings.¹ After marriage, Whisenton-Davidson's father was able to support the family by working at a steel mill. Her mother finished high school, but never went to college and was a stay at home mom. Whisenton-Davidson's parents moved to the industrial St. Louis during the "Great Migration," which was the movement of African Americans from the rural southern states. Her seven brothers were all older than her, and her sister was younger than her. Whisenton-Davidson grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood due to racial segregation, which was very common in St. Louis during that era. The famous Shelley v. Kraemer Court Case reflected the segregation of neighborhoods in St. Louis.²

When she was six years old, her family relocated to a different neighborhood as a result of their old community being torn down to expand the train station. The new neighborhood that they moved into was better, in terms of housing, than their previous one. The new neighborhood was previously inhabited and now vacated by whites who moved to an upgraded community with better housing. As Whisenton-Davidson put it, "As the whites did better in terms of housing, I guess we did too, but we

¹Sharecropping is an agricultural system where the tenant is allowed to use the landowner's land and in return, they have to give the owner a share of the crops grown there. Ruby Bridges grandfather also took up sharecropping to survive on the money he received. (Source: Bridges, Ruby. *Through My Eyes*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1999)

²The Shelley v. Kraemer Court Case was when the Shelley family bought a house in a white neighborhood. They were sued by Louis Kraemer who wanted to keep the Shelley's from taking possession of their new house because they were not white. (Source: The City of St. Louis Missouri: A Preservation Plan for St. Louis Part 1: Historic Contexts [Internet], 2011, St. Louis [cited October 30, 2015]. Available from: <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/Part-I-African-American-Experience.cfm>)

weren't doing as good [well] as they were."³ In their neighborhood, all the African American children played together and looked out for each other. Whisenton-Davidson fondly recalls enjoying the time spent with her young friends.

Whisenton-Davidson grew up in a close knit, Methodist family who attended church every Sunday. Many blacks who lived in St. Louis during that time belonged to the Methodist denomination. Her family, as a whole, was involved in many church-related activities. She herself was a member of the choir and the Methodist Union Fellowship for Children. Her enjoyable experiences at church played a role in her decision to attend a Methodist college later in her life.

When Whisenton-Davidson was about to enter the third grade, a major change occurred in her life, an experience that impacted her for years to come. Due to overcrowding in her neighborhood's school, Whisenton-Davidson was one of the select few who had to be bused from the all African American school to an all-white school. Since the morning commute to the new school was long, she had to wake up extra early to get ready for school. Every morning was a stressful time for this little girl. She constantly panicked about getting ready, eating breakfast, preparing lunch, and catching the bus on time. If any one of the students missed the bus, they were not attending school that day because there was no other way to get there. In order to prevent any possible interactions between the black and white children, the African American children were bused to school after all the white students were already in their classrooms. Although the *Brown v. Board of Education Case* was already settled several years earlier, the school had found a way around the decision without officially violating the ruling.⁴ They had to wait to go home until every single white student had left. The African American students were not allowed to interact with the white students. For example, these children were not permitted to eat lunch at the same time or place as the white children. They had to pack their own

³ Lavern, Whisenton-Davidson. Personal interview with the author. Millersville, PA. October 15, 2015.

⁴The *Brown v. Board of Education Court Case* was a case where the court decided that laws initiating separate black and white schools were unconstitutional. (Source: pbs [Internet], 2007, New York: Educational Broadcasting Cooperation [cited October 30, 2015]. Available from: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark_brown.html)

lunch, or they would go hungry for the day. They had to sit at hard foldable tables in the gym when they ate. These children were also kept from participating in school sports or the art and music programs. Whisenton-Davidson's experiences were similar to Ruby Bridges, as both attended an all-white school as an African American child.⁵ They both had the same fear and anticipation of unfamiliar and hostile surroundings. Unlike the experience of Ruby Bridges, Lavern Whisenton-Davidson was not allowed to interact with the white students at all. She and the other African American children were kept completely separate. Ruby Bridges had police officers present to prevent racial tensions while Lavern Whisenton-Davidson and the other black children were bused at different times to prevent racial tension. For both Ruby Bridges and Lavern Whisenton-Davidson, the teachers were all white and were nice to the students.

Whisenton-Davidson was too young to understand the extent of the prejudice and racial biases present in her life at that time. However, one thought which constantly plagued her mind stemmed from a current political situation known as The Cuban Missile Crisis.⁶ Fear and anticipation was rampant that atomic bombs would be dropped in the United States. There were bomb shelters in the basement of the school in case bombs were ever dropped. "I wondered if they had a separate bomb shelter room for us," Whisenton-Davidson remembered thinking, "so, that's really the only time I thought about the other kids and their advantages."⁷

After attending the segregated school for three years, Whisenton-Davidson was ready for a change as she moved up to middle school. During her years at the elementary school, Whisenton-Davidson remembered thinking it was just "so wrong and so weird," that the school would go to such

⁵Ruby Bridges is a pioneer in school integration. She was six when she had to attend an all-white elementary school in Louisiana. She had to overcome a lot of discrimination, including death threats, to attend this school. (Source: Bridges, Ruby. *Through My Eyes*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1999)

⁶The Cuban Missile Crisis was a 13 day dispute occurring in October 1962 between the United States and the Soviet Union over missile grounds in Cuba. It was the closest the Cold War came to before nearly becoming a nuclear war. (Source: U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian [Internet], 2013, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State [cited October 30, 2015]. Available from: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>)

⁷ Lavern, Whisenton-Davidson. Personal interview with the author. Millersville, PA. October 15, 2015

an extent to keep the two races separate.⁸ She questioned, “Why was it that they didn’t want to deal with us?” During her time at the middle school, she was now able to interact with white students for the first time. Also, there were now, though very few, African American teachers. Whisenton-Davidson began to have what she considered “role models,” who were more people who looked like her. She was now aware of more people of color with authority, other than her minister at church. At the middle school, Whisenton-Davidson did not feel the impact of racial segregation as much.

Around the time Whisenton-Davidson entered high school, it was becoming more and more common for African Americans to study past middle school. She attended Soldan High School. This was not the only high school that African Americans attended. There were other high schools such as Sumner High School.⁹ Children of more accomplished African Americans such as doctors and lawyers made up Sumner’s population. Although Whisenton-Davidson had already experienced racial segregation, she now began to realize the disadvantages associated with not growing up in an affluent family. “We didn’t have some of the things they [Sumner students] had,” Whisenton-Davidson explained.¹⁰ Sumner was a sizable school with more money, so those students were able to take swimming lessons and driver’s education courses. The families of Soldan High School were hardly able to purchase a car, so driver’s education courses would have been unnecessary even if it was affordable. Although Whisenton-Davidson did not have privileges associated with either being white or being raised in a wealthy African American family, she had the determination and motivation to attend college. As she proceeded to college, she was questioned by many about her inability to accomplish things that the others received lessons in. She simply responded by informing them that her school did not provide those types of training.

⁸ Lavern, Whisenton-Davidson. Personal interview with the author. Millersville, PA. October 15, 2015

⁹Sumner High School was the first high school for African American students in St. Louis. (Source: The City of St. Louis Missouri: A Preservation Plan for St. Louis Part 1: Historic Contexts [Internet], 2011, St. Louis [cited October 30, 2015]. Available from: <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/Part-I-African-American-Experience.cfm>)

¹⁰Lavern, Whisenton-Davidson. Personal interview with the author. Millersville, PA. October 15, 2015

For Whisenton-Davidson, being accepted into a college was a very important accomplishment. Unlike her older brothers, she did not have as much of a challenge in being accepted to college. “The boys went through at a time when a child of color could only attend college if they were a super basketball or football player,” Whisenton-Davidson elaborated.¹¹ Most universities did not allow admission for African American students at all. It was assumed that most black children would enter the workforce directly after high school. Whisenton-Davidson entered college in the late 1960s when it was “a lot easier” for African Americans to pursue a higher education. Whisenton-Davidson was the first of her siblings to be eligible for scholarships and financial aid as the civil rights act had already been passed.

Whisenton-Davidson was accepted into Morningside College, a Methodist College, in Sioux City, Iowa on an “almost-full” scholarship for her undergraduate studies.¹² Being the first in her family to study past high school, this was a considerable step into the “unknown.” This college was small to begin with. Out of the 1,000 students who were studying there, only 20 of them were African American. Now being in college, it may appear that Whisenton-Davidson had a smooth journey ahead of her. However, there were other incidents that constantly reminded her about her race. She recalls her experiences in Iowa being “a bit worse” than those in St. Louis. The people of her hometown in St. Louis were used to seeing African American people, or they were African Americans themselves. When Whisenton-Davidson moved to Iowa, she began to face harsher situations, such as name calling and street bullying. Iowa was an all-white state at that time, so majority of the people there had *never* seen an African American. Whisenton-Davidson was in a grocery store when she crossed paths with a mother and her white daughter. The daughter had never seen a person of color, and went on to ask her mother, “What’s wrong with that lady and her skin?” Though the mother apologized to her, Whisenton-Davidson still felt the sting of the question, for she was only 19. “I will always remember

¹¹Lavern, Whisenton-Davidson. Personal interview with the author. Millersville, PA. October 15, 2015

¹²Lavern, Whisenton-Davidson. Personal interview with the author. Millersville, PA. October 15, 2015

this,” Whisenton-Davidson mentioned. At the college campus, the small group of African Americans who studied with her marched around the campus with signs. Their goal was to gain acceptance towards people of color, especially the African American students who would study there after them.

After completing her undergraduate degree from Morningside College, around the early 1970s, Whisenton-Davidson continued her graduate education at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. She majored in biology and minored in chemistry. The University of Notre Dame was a school for male students. The year Whisenton-Davidson was admitted to Notre Dame was the first year that female students were accepted to the university. Whisenton-Davidson also roomed with another African American female by the name of Condoleezza Rice. Whisenton-Davidson recalls there being “a lot more acceptance towards blacks” at the University of Notre Dame. For the first time she began to see African Americans participating in more than just academics. There were African American students participating in extracurricular college activities such as basketball. As the population of blacks began to increase, so did the overall acceptance towards them.

In spite of being exposed to racial discrimination and biases, Whisenton-Davidson is a very accomplished professor. Although there were many circumstances where she felt like giving up, her story portrays how inner strength, determination, and perseverance can result in a successful completion of one’s goals. Her desire to pursue a higher education was reinforced by values instilled by her parents. Her parents advised all their children about the importance of obtaining education for a modest future. As a result, her siblings were also successful in their own career paths by obtaining college degrees in the fields of Pharmacy and Aeronautical Engineering after her. Apart from her family, Whisenton-Davidson has many African American friends who went on to be successful lawyers and doctors. She especially recalls her friendship with her college roommate, Condoleezza Rice. Similar to Whisenton-Davidson, Rice also obtained her Ph.D. and currently teaches at Stanford University. However, Rice is better known as the first African American Secretary of State. When

opportunity prevailed, success followed.

Many years have gone by, and society has overcome milestones of racial discrimination. A mark of success is determined by a person's hard work and effort. Race, religion, or gender should not be used as criteria to judge anyone. Though the country has made progress in terms of racial equality and tolerance, there are many improvements yet to be made in order to diminish racism and conclusions based on racial profiling.

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