

Reflect and Empower Essay

by Julie McLeod

The subject of Black Lives Matter is difficult for me to speak on. Not because I am scared or uncomfortable. But because I have experienced it for myself. I grew up in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn, New York. Where the color of your skin was a badge of honor. Where a simple head nod was a sign of respect and camaraderie. But outside of that community, my skin was seen as a weapon. A weapon that police officers and other race believed was dangerous. I grew up knowing that I looked different than some of my classmates but never really knew any different until I got older and began to see the small signs of racism. I remember the first time that I was racially profiled. I walked into a store and began to look over the products. As I walked, I began to realize that a store employee started to follow me around. She wasn't too close, but she wasn't too far either.

I noticed it and I started to get upset. There were other people in the store, and they weren't getting the same treatment. Then, I went to an item I had no interest in purchasing, picked it up, looked at it and put it back. Just to confirm my suspecting's. A few minutes later, she was in the same aisle "checking inventory". I was a paying customer and I wanted to be treated as such. I got on the checkout line and she stood behind me pretending to fix the shelves next to me. I turned around abruptly and locked eyes with her. Though we never said a word, she knew that I knew what she was doing. I was infuriated and almost called for a manager but in the end, I elected to leave the store and disregard the manner. Because the issue was bigger than this woman. The idea of Black Lives Matter isn't about superiority, It's about equality. I wanted the same carefree experience those other shoppers enjoyed. But If we're talking about why black lives matter now, it's because they didn't matter before.

I would like to say that was the first and last experience but sadly it wasn't. The summer of 2016, I was riding in the car with my husband and younger female cousins. The police pulled us over for making a left turn. When the police officers got out the car, they were aggressive and impatient. They searched the car and my purse, saying that my prescribed medication was an illegal drug. They even went as far as saying they smelled alcohol based off the cups we held in our hands. Which is a stretch because we do not drink. After they realized that we were minors and did nothing wrong. They got in their car and drove off. They didn't apologize nor did they acknowledge their actions. They just left. The aftermath of that situations left us scared, shocked and shaken up. We, then realized that being black was seen as a problem.

It is hard to know that we must prepare the younger generation of black boys for what they will experience. Whether if it's a conversation with my son about how to conduct himself when he is pulled over by the cops or even when someone follows him around in a store. I still have the obligation to inform and protect my son from people who might not see him as their equal. After marrying my husband, I realized that being a black man is the worst thing in today's country. As we seen, you never know if a simple stop by the police will be your last. The things that he has experienced is heartbreaking and disappointing. Every day that he leaves the house, I hope and pray that he comes back safe. We never know what will happen from day to day, but we do know that being a black man could determine your fate.

The movement Black Lives Matter is one that is needed today. We have seen many deaths due to police violence and injustices. We as African Americans have been fighting for

equality for hundreds of years. Black lives have always mattered, but now it is the time for the world to give us the equality that we deserve. Black Lives Matter is the start of something that will forever impact our country's history. Equality for African Americans isn't a new conversation, but it is a needed one.