



Video Story Transcript

A Black American Son's Survival Lessons

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-NGR66LHys>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Sheila Arnold. One day I got a phone call. "I want to come home!" It was my son.

"What's going on? What's going on, Chris? Talk to me!"

"I want to come home. I want to come home now."

Now this was my mild-mannered son, the year 2004, and he was a freshman attending DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. He never got flustered. "What's going on, Chris? Talk to me!"

"I want to come home! I want to come home now!"

And we stay on the phone a little bit longer but then he wouldn't give me any more details. And he had to get off the phone. And I called his grandparents and I said... told them what was happening and they said, "Ah, just give it a day or so. It'll be all right."

The next day, he called. "Mom, I want to come home! I want to come home now! Can you bring me home? Why can't you just bring me home?"

I said, "Baby, just talk to me! What's going on? Just talk to me!"

"But. Mom, I just want to come home! I hate it here! You just don't understand! I just want to go home! I know, I know things there."

"Chris. I just need you to talk to me. What's going on, baby?"

"I just want to come home!"

Again, the phone hung up and he hadn't told me what was going on. I started preparing for things to get ready to come home, trying to work some things out. The next day he called again and this time he wanted to come home still but he gave me a little more information.

He said, "Mom, people here – they're racists and I know what racists are. I'm from the South. I know that! Mom, they're racists here; they're prejudiced! I just want to come home."

"Hmm!" And then he began to tell me what had led up to this moment. First off, he had a roommate and his roommate was a true Irish boy all the way down from this head to his toe. It was Danny! And Danny readily admitted on the first day that they met that he had never said more than hello or goodbye to an African-American.

They got along wonderfully and became the best of friends and were always together. But Chris began to notice things, you see, when Danny and him would go into the Greek neighborhood that was around DePaul University and they would buy in the stores that were there. The words that were thrown at them became more and more unkind to both him and to Danny.

And then Chris began to notice that when he went through the lunch line that the ladies behind the counter would laugh and smile and joke with him and double his portions on his tray, which was a delight. But when Danny came, often right behind him, they wouldn't smile. They only put on there what he was required to get. It changed.

Then another incident! Both boys, Danny and Chris, run the track team together and one of the... some of the kids were running and practicing early and my son was up in the stands waiting for his turn to practice or to run. And he was sitting with some students and he looked down and someone on the team had done something good that was down practicing and he got up and he cheered for them. All of the students he was sitting with, which just happened to be all black athletes, and... and teammates that he was sitting with went, "Why are you cheering for him? He's white!"

But the last straw was the last incident. He had gone into a local drug store that was right there; he had been in the store often before. And he'd gone in looking for an alarm clock. And being a true young man, he didn't ask directions to where the alarm clock was.

He just logged up and down the aisles and he wasn't in a hurry so he just kind of slowly went up and down each aisle. At some point in time, a police officer came in; he noticed him but it didn't... wasn't a big deal. After a while, he realized that there was no alarm clock sold in that store and so, he went and bought a pack of gum and went out the store. The moment he walked out the store, the police officer came out right behind him and told him to stop immediately, show identification and empty his pockets. And Chris did. And he took his I.D. out. He was flustered and took out the piece of gum. He was demanded that the receipt be shown. He showed the receipt and the officer said, "Well, we had a report there... that someone was stealing from the store."

That was said to Chris while white people who had been walking in and out of the store went right by him. That was all he could take!

As my son relayed the story to me, it brought me back to when he was born. When my son was born in 1986, the statistic was that for an African-American born in a single parent-led home he had a 51 percent chance of being dead by the age of 21. And there were even higher statistics of him being either in jail, on drugs, and addicted and/or having a child out of wedlock. That statistic determined in my mind that I was, not

only going to make sure that my son was educationally just ahead of the game and achieved, but I was going to teach him everything he needed so he could survive.

And so, I made sure he could read early. And I can tell you my son's ability to articulate and negotiate were clearly formed by the time that he was in fifth grade and he did very well in school, particularly in mathematics.

But I also taught him how to live on the streets. I said, I told him, "You don't go running down, and exercising and jogging on some street with your hoodie over your head. You don't do that! And you don't worry about the fact that you might get stopped and pulled over if you're driving a car, even if that car is your grandfather's brand new Mustang and he bought it with flat cash." I told him that when a police officer says stop, you stop! "He says, 'Show you his I.D.' then you do. But you make sure when you show him your I.D., you tell him everything you're doing when that wallet comes out. 'Sir, I am taking the wallet out of my left pocket. I am pulling the wallet up with my right hand. I am bringing my left hand down to now take the wallet so I can then take my right hand and take out this I.D. to show you.' " And that may sound funny but I knew that's what he had to do.

I made sure to tell him not to worry about when people look at you funny when you go to a store.

Just keep your hands out of your pocket and where others could see them. I told them that there were times that he was going to be stopped for driving, walking and just flat being black. That's the way it was. He didn't react to it.

I told him that when he got to college, he was going to meet all kinds of women. And because he was an athlete, he was going to have all kinds of women of many cultures trying to date him. And others were going to be upset that he dated anybody outside of his own people and they might try to set him up. He was to be careful.

I talked to him about survival and staying alive as much as I talked to about English and math and history and biology. This was important for his life. And all those talks I had, everything I ever did, I still couldn't prepare him for what would happen in his heart when it would be so blatant. I couldn't help him when that racism hit him full frontal.

I couldn't prepare him for the anger and the bitterness and the confusion. Now I had to sit and watch and hope he would make a decision that was good on how to deal with this. I wondered... I wondered how he was going to react. I really did!

I wondered if he was going to be like some of the men I know... some of the people I know that are just bitter at the white man, the Man. Are we taking our jobs, are we taking our things... bitter and angry and, truly, just as racist in return. Or was he going to be the stereotypical black activist that only do for your own. Don't help nobody else! Take care of your own. It's all about you; it's all about us! We are one people. Don't worry about anybody else!

Or was he going to be like his... like his great grandfather who was called "boy" by young men much younger than him when he was an old man but he still became the vice president of a large insurance company. Or was he going to be like his grandfather who joined the Army and when he was young as an officer in the Army, he still couldn't eat in certain restaurants unless he went to the back door. But his grandfather still became a general officer.

Or was he going to be like his grandmother who oft times was looked at as the maid coming to work in someone's house as she visited other officers' homes. Or was he going to be like his mom, like me, who

became the first black student body president at her high school where there were more others than there were blacks. And set a precedent for years to come! What would he do?

I began to make preparations. Then on day four, he called me back. He said, "I don't need to come home!"

"All right. What happened?"

He said, "I don't need to come home. I got this! I decided I'm not going to let them change me. I know who I am and I don't have to be what they want me to be. I don't even think, Mom, they know that they are prejudiced and it's not just blacks and whites. They don't like where people come from even if they're the same color skin! Jamaicans versus African-Americans. Irish versus Italians. Oh, my goodness! Even Cubans and Puerto Ricans!"

He said, "Nah, I'm going to be better than that. Hey, I'm from the South. I got this." And then he said, "I love you, Mom!"

I hung up! I hung up the phone, and smiled and I called his grandparents.