



Video Story Transcript

Election Night: How President Barack Obama's Elections Changed My Life

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJazZn8Nd9w>

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.

My name is Donna Washington and this story is called Election Night.

In 2008, right before the presidential election, I was touring through a very conservative part of North Carolina. And the first day I got there, I was told by my sponsor not to be concerned, but the FBI was in town because someone in the community had been burning crosses on the lawns of the six elderly couples that were left in the county. They were African-American. And I thought, "Well, that's terrible, because it's terrible."

But I never thought about it really having an impact on me. I mean, I was just there visiting. I kept working in high schools and middle schools over the course of the next few days and it was amazing. I saw as all these girls with Sarah Palin glasses and McCain-Palin signs everywhere. And I was so excited because everybody was really excited about the election.

And on election night, on Tuesday night, I got back into the area where my hotel was, right around 4:30. And I pulled up to a drive-through, at a fast food restaurant that normally is open until 2:00 a.m. And there was a big sign on the, the speaker that said they were gonna close at 7:00.

And I thought, "I bet it's because they have teenagers, and they all want to go home and watch the election. That's cool."

So, when I got up to the window to collect my food, I, I asked the young man behind the window, I said, "So, why are you guys closing at 7:00?"

And he said (and I quote), “In case they riot.”

And I had a moment, because I was fairly certain I didn't become less black from the time I ordered the food to the time I got to that window. But somehow, me sitting there as a black person, it didn't occur to him that he was talking about me. And that's because, during that election, there was all this hyperbole and all this anger and fear that was going around, and black people ceased to be black people. We became this nameless cloud of doom that was going to descend.

And all I could think was, “There are only six elderly black people in this county. What are they going to do? Gather together somewhere and menace the street corners?”

So, I didn't say anything. I just kind of felt that's funny, that's kind of funny. And I took my food and drove back over to the hotel but there was no place to park. The, the parking was full. So, I, I managed to find a place to put my car. And I got out of the car and I couldn't figure out why Tuesday night, there were so many cars. And then it occurred to me, there is a big, flat screen TV in there. I bet they're watching the election. And as soon as I got closer, I could see through the window that Fox News was on and the room was packed. And that's when a lot of things going on in that community hit me.

And the first thing I thought was, “There are people burning crosses on the lawns of the black families here. Some of them may very well be in that room. And there are people who know who've been doing it and they have not seen fit to tell the authorities.”

And I was terrified to walk through that lobby and I thought, “I can't do this. I'm going to go in the back door.”

Because my room was right up the lobby and I didn't want them to know where I was. But even before I began to take that step back, to back away from that, that door, an image of my great-grandma Topsy came into my mind.

And, I swear to you, she was standing next to me. And I could hear her voice from segregated Texas saying to me, “Yo' money is the same colla as dey money. If you cain't go in the front door and sit where you want to sit, then you don't have no business going off in there.”

And I thought to myself, “Someday I am going to die. And on the other side of that, my great-grandmother Topsy is going to be waiting for me. And if I go in the back door, I will have to spend eternity trying to explain the choice... or I could spend 10 seconds and just walk the lobby.”

Mmm. Squared my shoulders, took my little bag, walk the lobby. I cannot tell you if anyone was looking at me or not. I don't remember. I just had my eyes focused (with my little bag) on the hallway that led to the door, and I got into my room. I closed the door. My, my dinner fell out of my hand, my purse slipped off my arm, and I realized I was shaking. And I was sweating, and I couldn't catch my breath and I didn't know what was happening. And I realized, I was having a panic attack.

And I kept telling myself, “Calm. Down. Just calm down.”

And, eventually, I did catch my breath and everything calmed down and I had my dinner. And I stayed up and the election was over. And I was really wanting to be excited but I was right off the lobby, and I didn't dare make any noise.

Fast forward four years. I'm down south in North Carolina. I'm in Romney-Ryan country. And Clint Eastwood had just done that thing where he talked to an empty chair at the RNC and said the people where I was, around in Romney-Ryan country, that thought it was a great idea to lynch the chairs from the trees, because

apparently that's reasonable political speech. And I didn't have any trouble in the community. No one said anything crazy to me. And that Tuesday night. I went, I actually got a nice dinner. And I went back to my hotel room and I sat down and it was over pretty early.

And then the next morning, I went up to go and get some breakfast. And I go down there. And. Again. I just... I'm the only black face in the room. I look around. The waffle line is out the window. I'm not going to have waffles. So, I put my tray down.

And an elderly woman, elderly woman comes out of the waffle line. She walks up to me and she grabs my arm. And she says to me, "I'm so glad that's over. Now we can talk to each other again."

And my first thought was sarcastic, which was, "Honey! Me, you're not talking to me. You're wasting your time, 'cause I don't know who you are."

And my second reaction was sort of incredulous, like, "What have you been doing the last four years, doing or saying, that makes you need to find absolution from the first black person you see!" But I didn't say that. I move right into being angry.

And I, I thought, "Again! You want to go back. Back to talking like there was nothing going on in our country? Like there are no undertones. I cannot go back. I will not go back and pretend people haven't said the most horrible things to me over the last four years. I will not go back and pretend that all of the things that have happened around me didn't happen. I won't go back and pretend that my neighbors aren't lynching black mannequins from the trees and going, "It's not personal or racist. I'm not doing that anymore. If you want to talk to me, we have to go forward from here."

And then I realized that that's what she was trying to do... She had gotten out of the waffle line, walked over to the first and only black person in the room. And taking me by the arm, she had, in fact, "un-othered" me.

And I just looked at her and thought, "I hope that I am that brave." And I smiled down at her, and I said, "Yes, we can."

And she just lit up. She started smiling, and she just, she stood up so proud. And she wandered back over to the waffle line.

And I made two promises to myself after those two election nights. The first, I will never let anyone ever make me feel like the "other" in my own country ever again. Not allowed. And the second promise, that I will strive to be brave enough to get out of the waffle line, walk over to someone I don't know, take them by the hand and say, "We have to talk."