



Video Story Transcript

First Generation Chicagoan – No Pigeon Holing

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o76W5JW5hrU>

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 family is part of the great migrations of African-Americans that took place from the South to the North, in the early 1900's. You see, the Brownlee family really moved from Senatobia, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee. And then my father took that trip north to Chicago, Illinois. A few years later, he sent for my mother and the children. And the last three girls, myself included, were born in Chicago. So, I am a first-generation Chicagoan.

I grew up on the West Side of Chicago. Oh! The West Side...We had everything. There were blacks and whites, well, very few whites, but a lot of African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, gypsies. And then a few Polish, Italian and Irish sprinkled in. And I had a funny kind of accent with this happening. People would always ask me where I'm from. See, when I was little, people used to say, "You know, Chicago's West Side is Little Mississippi" because the main dialect they heard was Southern. But we had all of that other mix. So, when I talk, I might have a little island sound because sometimes when I say, "man," it will come out like "mon." And then the rest was kind of Southern and Midwestern. And people always saying where are you from?

And I'd said, "Chicago."

They'd said, "No, really. Where are you from?"

I'd said, "Really. I'm from Chicago." And they didn't believe me. So finally, I started saying, "That's it," to whatever island they thought I was from. But it's all good.

You know, when I visited Puerto Rico, I actually had someone say, "I know you're really Puerto Rican. You're just afraid to admit your heritage because you forgotten the language."

Well, whatever. Think what you want. It's all good. But I do wonder why people always have to pigeonhole someone. And if you don't fit into their concept of what it should be, they try to make you think there's something wrong with you.

See, my family is all colors of the rainbow. We go from like a creamy-white to blue-black and everything in between. And we love each other really hard. Most of the time people try to get us to deny each other. You know, they're constantly saying, "You're not cousins. Come on, why you lying?" But we are cousins.

When we were little, we had this game we would play with newcomers. It was called "Guess Who's Related?" And usually the people would try to make me related to our neighbors who were Creole. And we go, (*Buzzer sound*), "Wrong answer." Because...just because we are the same color does not make us related. What makes us related, of course, is the blood.

But people were always trying to change that, you know. My cousin, he had this girlfriend, and he brought her over to meet the family. He had been talking about her for some time. He thought this is "the one." And she got there and she's real nice. Oh, she was so pleasant. And then, of course, when they left she said, "That's not your cousin." And she kept trying to make him admit that he wasn't related to us. So, I think about that sometimes. So, you thought both of our families were lying to you. Anyway, they didn't stay together because he figured, "If you can't believe me when I'm telling truth, we have no hope here."

My family. We don't care what you think. We know who we are. We knew then and we know it now. And it doesn't matter what you think. Because we know.

You know, in the 60's, it got really strange because...You know in the 60's, one of my classmates said to me, "Why are you doing this? This is not your fight. You can pass."

Now what he was talking about is, King was about to have a demonstration and I was planning on marching. and he said, "This is not your fight. You can pass."

Well, I suppose I could pass, but why would I? Why would I pass and pretend to be white? I know, I've heard that there's some white blood in my family. In fact, I heard that my grandfather was Irish but I never met the man. His name is not on any birth certificate. And I'm not even sure what the relationship was consensual since my grandmother never talked about it and my mother would not allow us to ask her about. So why would I want to pretend I was white? Why would I want to pretend I was white? That this was not my problem? When I know that my uncle had a flat in Cicero and had to be very prayerful and hope that those young, white punks had enough sense to know that he didn't want to be on their street changing his tire any more than they wanted him there.

Why should I pass? And, and, then ignored the truth to the humor that my other uncle used to say when he would talk about bringing my mother to work. And my baby sister wanted to ride. And once he dropped Ma off, she started crying. Oh, big wails. And he said, "Girl, you better hush up before somebody think I'm tryin' ta steal some little white chil'." And it was funny. People laughed every time he told this story. But if the reality, if that had happened, would they have believed that that little, light child with blond hair was his niece?

My family... all colors. We ranged from creamy-black to paper brown cafe au lait, paper bag, paper bag brown, mahogany, dark-black, blue-black. And it doesn't matter if you think we were related or not. Because we are family and we love each other. We're blood. Blood brought us together. But blood is not what keeps us

together. Love binds us together. We don't live in the same building anymore. We don't even live in the same state. But when we get together, love fills the space.