



Video Story Transcript

Hey, I'm Black Too! So, Where Do I Fit In?

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Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGuNITWNBzY>

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 Mama Edie McLoud Armstrong. Going away to college in the 60s was so exciting. So much was going on. There were all kinds of things: political ideas, and spiritual ideas, many ideas to explore, new ideas to explore, but also old realities to reckon with.

For example, as a child growing up in a racially changing neighborhood, every now and then I didn't feel quite like I quite fit in. And sometimes it was very difficult. Even sometimes the way the teachers would pit the black children against the white children. Ah, I mean, there was nothing that was spoken, but you felt this favoritism being shared towards the white children, which made us feel kind of bad. And I was seven years old or so, you're not quite understanding what's going on. All you know is that it just doesn't feel good.

And the same kind of thing happened in high school. But even sometimes as the white children were leaving the neighborhoods, then they started pitting the lighter complexioned children against the darker complexioned children so that the lighter complexioned children got favoritism, which caused a rift and a problem. And sometimes even the lighter complexioned children were beaten up and called words like "high yella," which made them feel bad. And all they wanted to do also was to just fit in.

Well, in high school, sometimes there were specific things that would happen that just let us know that some of the teachers were just not happy that we were there. And they seemed determined to put blocks in our way.

For example, having a session of guidance, a counseling session with my guidance counselor in high school, she suggested that, um, I not consider college because she didn't think I'd make it there. So, she suggested that I try secretarial school. Well, I went on and I got accepted into Northern Illinois University anyway.

But even while there, in another guidance counseling session, the director of my program at that time told me that speech pathology, audiology were really not fields for black people but I was a nice person, and then I might want to consider social work. Now social work is a noble profession, and, in fact, I had considered it at one time but it wasn't what I had selected then. I went on and got my Master's Degree in Speech Pathology anyhow. Sure wish I coulda come back and found both of those teachers, show 'em my diploma, my degrees.

But it was an interesting time too, in that I was starting to meet children who were coming from places I had never heard of. I guess I thought that most black people in America lived in cities like Chicago, and Detroit, and L.A., and down south. Then I started hearin' about places like Rock Island and Cairo. Well, I had actually heard about Cairo because clearly the Welcome Wagon was not rolled out for children of African descent in cities like Cairo. And, in fact, cities like Cairo were those places, uh, uh, that we called, sometimes "up south" because of the attitudes that were still there.

But meeting some of the students from those places helped me to understand, as I was learning more about the great migration, that African-Americans ended up in all kinds of places: west, and to the north, and cities large and small. Now the great migration was a period that took place roughly between 1914 and the 1970s. And what had happened, you know, (as the kids say what happened was) the European American immigrants were being sent to war. And with the rapidly building industry, there was still a need for people to fill those positions for cheap labor. And so African-Americans were typically not welcome in the military services. So, the opportunity was there. So, they came in droves from all over the south, all over the slave south trying to escape situations like, uh, the Jim Crow laws. Those laws that kept us separate... that had us in separate schools, and separate swimming pools and, and unable to even attend theaters where we might perform.

And it was a difficult time, even once they arrived up in the north, and tryin' to find some place to live was also challenging because many people in cities like Chicago, and, especially, in Chicago, only wanted to welcome in people who we would normally call white Anglo-Saxons. Now that was a problem for African-Americans. There was nothin' about most of them that resembled the white Anglo-Saxons. However, in an interesting way, those very, very light-complexioned African-Americans who managed to purchase property in certain areas because they passed or looked like they could pass, actually opened the way, opened the door for others to move into some of those communities. And what a surprise that was when these little brown-complexioned people started showing up in the neighborhood.

But there was a policy called redlining that was intended to keep children of African descent, and other minorities as well, from being able to purchase property in certain areas. And so, it was decided in 1990... in 1966 that there would be a march in a neighborhood of, on the South Side of Chicago called Marquette Park. And I remember that day, um, and it was really an amazing situation. Um, and... but many things happened as a result of the march in Marquette Park that opened up doors, opened up the doors of the universities as well as the neighborhoods.

So, enter my friend Renee. Now, Renee was a person who had been born in Chicago. But at the age of nine, her father had gotten transferred to another city, one of those cities I had never heard of, but she was the first African-American in her elementary and high school. Pioneering, definitely! And so, uh, understandably, she learned to speak like her white contemporaries. Uh, she even moved and, and danced like them. But when it was time for her to come into college, she was so excited because she had many good friends among her Euro-American counterparts in her town. However, she was hungry for interactions with children of African

descent. So, she was so excited about going to Northern, and meeting, and mixing, and mingling with these kids.

But here she comes. "Hi. My name is Renee. What's yours?"

Well, people were kinda looking at her like, "So what's with her?"

And so, it's easy to assume that she was what we would sometimes call a "wanna be," somebody who would prefer to be white. And that just wasn't the case. She was, when I first met her, she was warm and bubbly. And she was friendly, and she was very smart, but that even became a problem because sometimes we'd be in class, and she was sometimes a little bit too eager to be the first one to answer. "Oh, well, that's because such and such, and, and what have you."

And so, some of the other students would look at her like, "Okay, so now not only is she a "wanna be," but now she's a Miss Know-It-All too!"

Poor Renee. Her popularity was taking a serious nose dive. Well, one particular day, we were having a meal together, which we often did. And you have to consider the timing. In 1969 when I went away to school, this was the time when we had just lost people like Dr. Martin Luther King, John and Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X. Um, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark of the Black Panther Party were brutally shot in their beds as they slept on the West Side of Chicago under the inspiration of J. Edgar Hoover by 14 Chicago police officers. So, there was a lot of anger at that time. So, the idea of a black girl comin' along lookin' like she'd rather be a white girl was not going to get any points. So, here we are, Renee and I sitting there at the dining, in the dining hall of the dormitory, and we were just about to finish our meal. Now I had noticed some other African-American students a little bit in the distance at a table beyond Renee, but she couldn't see them because they were to her back. But I saw them with their heads together, whispering, and talking, and pointing, and gesturing, and I was like, "Oh, Lord. Here comes trouble."

So, I was hoping that they wouldn't say anything. But just as we were about to leave, they got up, and they came over. And without even looking at her, they looked directly at me, and they said, "Whachoo doin' wit heh? She thank she white. She don even know she black. You know, I, I don even know, understa... understand... why you talkin' to her?"

And I was just about to respond. But Renee in her very direct and confident way, she stood up and she said, "I do so know that I am black. You just don't know that I am black. And Edie is still here because she's my friend, and I could be your friend too. But it's your loss." And then she said, "Come on, Edie."

Ha, ha, ha! And so, it's like, okay, she took care of that. So, ha, ha, so I got up and I was about to leave, and they looked at me, and they said, "So, so, what's so... why are you with her?"

And I say, "Like she said, we're friends, and she's a nice girl. So, if you would prefer not to look into that and to see her as the person that she is, that is your loss. So, um, I'll see you all later."

Now I was pretty well liked, and what have you, among many circles on the campus. So, we didn't have any problems. So, I walked away ca... uh, Renee and I walked away, but she was fuming. We went back to the dorm, and I managed to kind of decompress her. And we talked about the situation, but then we went on, and prepared to go to the dance at the University Union that night. And when we did, we had a good time. And I watched her doin' her little white girl dance, eh, heh, which was really just kinda comical to me, but she was a sweet girl.

She continues to be a sweet girl. And, in fact, she moved away to a state far away, but she came back to Chicago to be in my wedding. And 40 years later, we're still friends.