



Video Story Transcript

I Deserve to Be Here

By: Storyteller Emily Hooper

www.aseblackstorytellers.org/member/14

Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls4598ldMn0>

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 Emily Hooper Lansana and this story is called – I Deserve to Be Here. It is about my educational journey. I was born in 1966 in Shaker Heights, Ohio. And my parents moved to Shaker Heights, because they wanted to provide us access to opportunities that had been elusive for black people. My parents believed in education and they wanted to give us the best possible.

Well, in Shaker Heights there were a group of people who decided that the response to desegregation that they wanted to go for was voluntary busing. My father was on a committee and they decided the best age for this was 4th grade and so my sister was among the first group of students to be bussed. My parents were not completely satisfied with the experience and I discovered this when at the end of 3rd grade I was told that they were going to keep me at the neighborhood school. There was only one problem, I had seen that bus and I wanted to get on it.

I wanted to see what I was missing and so after a lot of back and forth and back and forth my parents relented and I rode that bus. Twenty minutes across town to a completely different world. A few months into the school year I came home after making some friends and having some play dates and I announced to my father, “I want to live in a big house like my friends”. And my father said “no, you don’t”. And I said, “no, really, I want to move. I want to live in a big house like they do”. And my father said, “no, you don’t” and I said “why not?” and my father said “Baby, you know, you got to watch out for those big houses, because a lot of the time, they are haunted”. And I believed him.

My father has a way of making us feel that who we were and what we had was enough. He wanted us to believe that we could do anything. So, in my house when I was growing up, I was not allowed to say the word “can’t”. In my father’s book, “can’t” was a curse word and he reacted to it as he would to any other curse word. I was about ten years old before I realized this was not the case in every house, but that’s the way it was in mine.

In elementary school when I was choosing friends I didn't spent a lot of time thinking about white friends or black friends, we were just friends. And then I went to junior high school and the entire social landscape changed. Racial lines were drawn and you had to be careful about crossing them. I found this out when one of my black friends called me on the phone at night and said, "Listen, I wanted you to know that, I kind of still want to be friends with you, but you have too many white friends you are an Oreo so, I can't talk to you at school". I had never heard the word Oreo used like that before and certainly didn't think that I was one. I just thought that I had friends and I was keeping them.

I struggled to navigate that climate and I finally found my place with the theatre people and then I went to high school. And in high school things were pretty much the same, the black kids sat on one side of the cafeteria and the white kids sat on the other side of the cafeteria and the theatre people and the athletes kind of were able to negotiate between.

Then, in my junior year of high school, there was a big assembly called and we were told that this assembly was to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and that they had invited a guest speaker and when we walked in there was this very stately man who looked like Paul Newman and when he began to address the student body, he went into the most horrible racist tirade that I had never seen, stereotypes of black people and brown people that were just horrible and when he was finished, we were broken up in to the discussion groups and we were told to share our reactions to what we had seen.

We were horrified, we were angry and we were hurt and when we came back into the auditorium, our guest speaker revealed that actually he was black. And that he had made a decision to use the fact that most people assumed that he was white as a means of addressing serious racial issues. It worked, because it made us talk about things that we never talked about before.

And my group of friends decided that we wanted to do more than talk. We wanted to do something. So we started what was called the Student Group on Race Relations. And the focus of our work was to have high school students go into elementary schools and talk to kids about friendship and peer pressure and the fact that it should be okay to cross lines, to make friends, to be who you wanted to be.

Well, then I needed to start that journey toward thinking about where I was going to college. My father passed away the day before my 16th birthday and my father had always said, "My baby girl is going to grow up and go to Yale." There he was, wanting the best for me. I had no interest whatsoever in going to Yale. I didn't think I'd be happy there, I didn't think I was smart enough to go there, and my sister pushed me and pushed me because of my dad. And I finally went to my high school counselor and said I wanted to apply. And she said "Ah, that's going to be a far reach for you".

And I believed her. I sent the application off and I never thought again about it. I went to auditions for theatre schools and I was thinking about where I was going to go to theatre school when the letter came. I thought it was a joke, really. I remember thinking oh, this is really funny. I put it on the table, I didn't think about it and then people started to call my mom and said "she is about to miss out on a really important opportunity" and so I found myself as a freshman at Yale. And there I started to make friends in a different way. I started to navigate that landscape as a black student at Yale. And it was so important to me to do a good job. I felt like I was so lucky to be here, it was such a special opportunity. I didn't want to fail anybody.

One of my white friends from high school came to visit me and she said, “you know, it seems like you’ve gotten more black at Yale”. That was pretty funny to be more black at Yale. Then I looked around and realized that now I was sitting at the black table in the cafeteria. And I hadn’t thought about it that way anymore than I hadn’t thought about it that way in high school. I was just sitting with my friends. And I realized that these issues are very complex in terms of when you look on the outside and say, these kids are here and these kids are here, and you don’t realize what draws people together, why people make the friends they make and what they need and draw from those friendships.

In my senior year at Yale, I signed up to take a graduate level course with Cornell West. And the course was called “African American Intellectuals”. And in that class we learned about black people who had been great writers and thinkers and serious important visionaries. And how they’d gone to ivy league schools and the contributions that they made to history and that class changed me, because I thought suddenly – imagine if I had walked into Yale as a freshman thinking, “I deserve to be here”. Not, “I’m lucky to be here and I got in by accident and I got to be careful that I don’t mess up”, but “I deserve to be here”.

How would it have changed the way that I walked?

How would it have changed the way that I spoke?

How would it have changed the way that I took access to those opportunities?

I realized then for me that racial justice is about making everyone feel that wherever they walk – they deserve to be there.