



Video Story Transcript

That's What My People Do: Facing Prejudice in a 1960s High School

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

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 Eunice Jarrett and my story starts in the 1960s, in Indiana.

The complexion of our high school was changing and the black parents encouraged their kids to stand up and be a credit to our race. So, I became our high school student government's token Negro. One of our teachers had died suddenly, and the student government people were asked to organize a memorial service.

And I remember the service going kind of like this. We had a meeting and I remember the meeting going something like this. Max was the president and he decided that he would preside over the meeting.

Rose really liked the old teacher. And so, she said that she would give the highlights of the teacher's life. Chris was a poet and he volunteered to tell the poem. Huh, and Tom, Tom decided that he should say the closing prayer.

And then they decided, "Well, what, what should Eunice do?"

Tom said, "Let her sing. Isn't that what her people do?"

Like I wasn't in the room. I mean, I was right there. Why would they say for me to sing? They never heard me sing. Ohh! Sing and dance. That's what they think my people do. Huh. Well, they didn't know. They didn't

know that letting me sing might break that stereotype. Letting me sing, I might bring my whole race down from that high pillar of musical expectation. But I'd sing, because that's what my people do.

You see, my sister Annie, she stepped up and she went to teachers' college, graduated with honors, only to be told that this color of her skin disqualified her from teaching in her own hometown. Huh. She won that federal court case and the superintendent of schools who said, "Over my dead body," he died. And my sister became the first Negro teacher in our whole school city. She inspired other people, and that's what my people do.

Fred didn't know, Fred didn't know that I knew some real singers. I mean, my mother and my sisters, they could really sing. My mother, she fancied herself to be a soprano Marian Anderson. Hmm. When she got to sing on Sundays, she had her own gospel arias. But she would always tell us the story of that magnificent Negro woman who sang opera all across the United States and all around the world. Then she told the story of the Daughters of the American Revolution who wouldn't let her sing at their event in Constitution Hall, in front of an integrated audience. Because Marian Anderson was a Negro. Hmm.

Mama said, "What the devil means for bad, God will use it for good." Mama said, "Mrs. Roosevelt fixed it. Instead of Constitution Hall, Marian Anderson got to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on a beautiful Easter morning, in front of thousands and thousands of people. I can still feel the pride of Mama's voice when she told that story.

Yes. Daughters of the American Revolution. Yes, that organization. They were the same daughters, they gave out awards to eighth graders for citizenship and leadership. And when I graduated eighth grade in 1966, I was the winner of that award.

Our principal and faculty, they voted for me. But when they found out who I was, they turned my name into the DAR. And when they found out who I was, they refused to give me the award because it was supposed to be given to a white student.

Well, our white principal said, "We voted for her. And if you don't give it to her, we won't give your award ever again!"

I still have that award somewhere in a box. Can you imagine how I felt standing there to receive an award that I knew they didn't want to give me? But I stood there and I was gracious, because that's what my people do.

Well, while Rose was writing my name, I wondered, "Should I get Mama or my sisters to sing?"

Well, the student government kids didn't know that when I went to choir rehearsal, my sisters got the best singing parts, they got the leads. And the rest of us, we had to clap and rock in the background. The student government kids didn't know I had a hard time clappin' and rockin' at the same time.

But I think I'll sing, even though once a lady at choir rehearsal whispered very loudly that I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. So just to make her a liar, I practiced finding my tone, and I put it in my imaginary bucket.

Well, you know, I agreed to sing not because I'm the best singer, but we stand up. And sometimes we have to stand up to people who don't know it was enough to not like us.

You know, they say that when one black family moves into a block, it breaks the block. Well, when my family moved, we broke the block. And the boy next door made it his job to stand at our fence and call us names, every day. And we had to walk past him, hold our head up high, and ignore him every day, until the day he came into the fence, ready to fight girls in their own backyard. Well, my middle sister got in trouble for fighting back. But you know, sometimes we just get tired, sometimes we really do. Huh.

Well, all I had to do was sing a song. I just had to pick a song. "Let My People Go?" Uh, that was a little sarcastic. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot?" That was probably the only spiritual that some of my classmates knew. But I was a Negro and we had spirituals. That's what my people do.

Well, it was the day of the program. I remember the shuffling feet, letting down the wooden auditorium chairs, the hushed whispers. The student government officers, we entered stage left and there were chairs, wooden chairs and an arc behind the podium. Yes, hhh, I remember.

Max went to the podium, and he, in his most eloquent words, explained the reason for the assembly and we started the assembly. He introduced Rose, and Rose had done her... She'd done her research. I didn't know that I... that teacher had gone to Tibet and knew how to ski. But I was not surprised that she taught a lot of the parents, and she had a cat.

Well, next Chris went up to read his poem. I don't know what he said because I knew I was next. Then Max went back to the podium, and he said words and more words and I was looking for my invisible bucket. But then Max turned and smiled at me.

So, I stood up. And I walked to the podium. And I looked out on the darkness, and I did what my people do.