

Why I Write: Shawnta S. Barnes

By Shawnta S. Barnes – April 19, 2018



On April 26, 2016, I had my first op-ed “Why I do this work” published by the *Indianapolis Recorder*. Prior to this, the only other work I had published was

a poem in a college newsletter and gardening blog posts I wrote on my gardening website to share with my family.

I can't remember exactly when I started writing, but I have been writing since I was a young girl. I only wrote for myself, for my enjoyment and to unleash the thoughts I had floating around in my head. I never thought much about sharing my work publicly until I was encouraged by Patrick McAlister to write the op-ed the *Indianapolis Recorder* published. I didn't believe I had much to say that would resonate with others and that's why I mostly kept my writing to myself. The response from readers to my op-ed shattered that notion. People encouraged me to write more. I started submitting my work to various publications and then I was asked to join the *Indy/Ed* team and I'm glad I did.

I write about education because too many times the education stories that need to be told don't get told. I want to help share those stories. How I believe I add the most value to our *Indy/Ed* team is I am able to speak from various lenses that I have outlined below:

I've been an Indiana student.

I write about education as an Indiana resident because I have lived in the state of Indiana my entire life, including college. Unfortunately, some pitfalls of the education system that were taking place when I was a child are still happening today. I write to bear witness to those travesties and remind lawmakers and community advocates that although we have come far, we still have farther to go.

I'm an urban educator.

Although I student taught in rural Indiana and my first teaching job was in the suburbs, I have taught the majority of my career in urban schools that served mostly minorities and students in poverty. In Indianapolis, I have worked in a charter school, township schools, and for Indianapolis Public Schools. When people want to tell half-truths about circumstances in those various types of schools, I am compelled to tell the truth based on my personal experiences to counter those false narratives.

I'm a parent.

Believe it or not, in fifth grade I wrote a short story that was included in our 5th grade Writer's Fair called Twin Trouble (...and I still have that story too). Fiction became reality because I'm a parent of first grade twin boys, who attend our neighborhood boundary public school. As a person who also engages our education system from the parent side, it allows me to help other parents navigate the complicated education system in Indianapolis. There are racist teachers in Indy schools who don't care about black and brown kids and would rather be teaching in the suburbs where they live, but Indy pays better. I write to help parents advocate for their children when barriers such as racism and failing schools seem insurmountable.

I want our stories told differently.

Shortly after my "Why I do this work" op-ed was published, I was interviewed by *Chalkbeat Indiana* for their "What's Your Education Story?" series. The article was titled, "Even though I didn't see my dad except on Saturdays...I felt his presence" and my father hated the title and did not care for the article. He felt the title was just click bait and made it seem like he was an absentee dad. He thought people would see the title and want to read the article because the title made it seem like it was another one of those black child overcoming stories. He said, "When they write about the black man, they always make it seem like we aren't there, even if we are." When I told my father, I would be writing for *Indy/Ed* he said, "Tell the truth and lift us up in your writing." *Indy/Ed* is part of the *Citizen/Ed* network and the majority of our writers are of color and that makes a difference in how we tell the stories of people of color. Honestly, there are not enough writers of colors writing about education.

It's my gift.

My husband and I are part of a financial literacy ministry at our church where we help people learn to manage their finances using DeForest Soaries' dfree curriculum. We met with our pastor last week to discuss the course and if you know anything about meeting with a pastor, you know they always want to

know how your personal life is going and that led us into a discussion about my writing and this what my husband said to our pastor:

Shawnta is a talented writer. Writing is second nature to her. She doesn't struggle to write; it is her natural talent. If I had my way, all she would do is write because I believe she could become a successful writer and make a difference through that platform.

Is my husband biased? Yes, but we are incredibly honest with each other. If I'm wearing something that doesn't look right, he will tell me and I'm not offended. We are just that honest with each other. He reads what I write. If a piece seems off, he'll let me know. Over the years, teachers have told me I'm a good writer. I even wrote an essay about Jane Austen and explained why *Pride and Prejudice* is a lame novel for a class where the teacher loved Jane Austen and I earned an A- on the paper. I might be a quiet person, but yes, I'm really that bold. Maybe arguing a point about a literary work has value to someone somewhere, but how much of a difference does that really make? Really, I could write about anything, so why education?

I believe you should not waste your gifts or talents and that your gifts should be used to help others. I use my writing talent to make a difference and to improve outcomes for others especially for minorities and the least of these and that's why I write about education.

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