



The Racists Aren't All in Rural Indiana

By Educator Barnes - December 1, 2020

We are finally in the final month of December. Although 2020 will be a year we all won't forget due to the coronavirus pandemic, it wasn't all negative. The pandemic forced everyone to chill for a moment. During those moments of being at home with access to activities we loved being canceled, we were forced to really look at the state of our local community, our city, our state, our country, and even the world. In addition to the pandemic being a defining

factor of 2020, social justice and racial equity was also a focal point. Although I'm glad this is now a focus, I know we have a far ways to go.

As people processed what they should do and how they could help, at times, the focus was more on blaming instead of recognizing our part. This became clearer as I talked to educators in Indiana. One white educator said, "The racists are in rural Indiana." I had to pause. Inside my head, I screamed, "This is a generalization." Then, I started processing my response. One of the ways I try to impact others is by sharing my life experiences.

I shared my student teaching experience. At Purdue University, I was the only Black person in the English education cohort. When student teaching time came around, we had to write a letter about ourselves, so mentor teachers could pick us. I assumed that I would student teach in West Lafayette or Lafayette. Shortly after we wrote the letters, I was informed that I was the first person picked, and I was student teaching in Chalmers, Indiana.

My parents, especially my dad, were not happy. They were worried that something may happen to me there or on the way back and forth from West Lafayette and Chalmers. Specifically, my dad suggested, I should ask for a different placement. I told him I would not. Originally, I was supposed to work with two mentors teachers, but at the start of my student teaching, I learned that I was only going to work with one. He was an excellent mentor teacher.

Even though I was the only Black person in the building each day, I was happy. People were kind. The mentor teacher I ended up working with was the one that picked me. I did not see the confederate flag. I didn't get called the n-word. No one tried to touch my hair. I wasn't asked questions on behalf of the Black race. I was just Shawnta, the student teacher, who happened to also be Black.

Now, as an educator almost halfway through my 15th year, some of the people I talk with are rural Indiana educators. They want to learn and support social justice. The majority of the racism I have faced in education, as a Hoosier, was in Indianapolis and the suburbs. It doesn't matter where you live in Indiana or across the globe because racism is not a location on a map; it is a location in the heart.

As we move into 2021, I want to challenge us all to spend less time trying to identify where racists are and make sure the racist isn't looking you back in the mirror.