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Who I Am Where I Am

I doubt my perspective of Milwaukee would be very different today whether or not I attended an out-of-city independent high school or once lived in one of its upper class suburbs. Either way, my cultural experiences have given me a clear realization of the city's incredible diversity. Still, however, I doubt that I would have such a profound appreciation for my own privileges over the years had I not moved (officially) into the City of Milwaukee before my freshman year in high school or attended University in Milwaukee's downtown. It is sad that stereotypes and racial profiling still exist; sadder, even still, that almost everyone in the Milwaukee area, even the United States, myself included, has witnessed or been a party to it at some time. Learning to understand that communities influence one's behaviors is a step towards solving the issues that come from those behaviors, a step I've finally begun to explore and appreciate.

In my early childhood, from age 6 to age 14, I grew up on a small block inside an intimate suburban community directly outside of the heart of downtown Milwaukee. The architecture of this block, and most of the Washington Highlands community, was comprised of cookie cutter late 19th and early 20th century homes, with nearly identical interior layouts and equal square footages of land in both the front and back yards. There were precise rules as to the nature of any additions being made to the houses, the type of landscaping and, though unspoken, expectations for immaculate yard and home upkeep. Even decorations around holiday seasons were in the same subdued and elegant style as the houses themselves. Loud flashing lights, unnecessary

noises, or tacky ornaments, though not forbidden in the literal sense, were never to be seen. Surrounded on all sides by busy streets, the neighborhood had only narrow curving streets and private alleys, both pristine and quiet at all times of the day. The themes of the neighborhood seemed to be quiet and order, keeping the disorder and noise of Milwaukee out and inside, creating a perfect little world that the residents could control through property management.

The cleanliness and quiet order that hovered like a cloud among these homes belonged also to its owners: white, middle to upper class citizens of respectable backgrounds and significant community influence. It was an almost obsessive compulsiveness that ruled the lives of all the Highlands' residents as Father left for work every morning at seven and Mother transported all of the youngsters to private school or lessons every morning only to return and 'keep watch' on her neighbors through half-open curtains. We children played games that mirrored that structure of our parents' lives: Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians, Something and Another that involved the traditional bad guys or deviators being captured and removed. The louder games, Ghost in the Graveyard and Kick the Can, I recall, were often restricted to the open park in broad daylight. Noise after nine o'clock was prohibited, though we often wondered, then, why the sign in the park said the curfew was ten. Order seemed to be as much a daily part of our lives, both the young and slightly older of the neighborhood, as breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Late summer one year, when I was about 11, one of the most prominent families on our block moved out as a result of a divorce, a disruption that, in itself, caused more of a break in the order than the Highlands could imagine. Of course, the house was of considerable size and value, and we expected a family of traditional Washington Highlands means to move onto our block. When the first African American family began unpacking their trucks, there was a minor

earthquake-like stir amongst the residents. It wasn't until I met their son, a boy not much younger than myself, that I realized what the fuss was all about. He didn't dress the same as us, he didn't talk the same as us and he certainly didn't look the same as us. He and his family ate dinner outside at 9:00 at night and his brother often played basketball until well past midnight. In short, they had disrupted the order and tradition by being loud and not white. Rumors once circulated that they were behind on bill payments, that they tried too hard to fit in to the 'normality' of our neighborhood and would surely fail, that it was only a matter of time until the house would be repossessed. The rumors died over time, however, and the ordered life of the neighborhood returned. Those that did not forge a new friendship, continued on in ignorance and the new family remained in their home as actively quiet members of the community.

The beginning of the summer before my freshman year of high school our eight-child family outgrew our home on the block and probably the traditions of family size in the neighborhood. We moved to a much larger, but surprisingly less expensive home only three blocks away. The smallest thing that changed with that move would also prove to be the greatest. Our zip code now placed us on the very edge of the city of Milwaukee, no longer within the wealthy stereotype of the Highlands or Wauwatosa. We now lived (and still do) on a busy thoroughfare especially for morning and afternoon rush hour traffic. The heavy sound of buses braking, stereos blasting, and neighbors conversing permeated every moment of every day, interrupted my suburban sleep habits and put me in a temporary state of unease despite the warm welcome we received from so many of our new neighbors and complete strangers. Many of my extended family members, friends and babysitting jobs still remained in the Highlands, and for the majority of that first summer, not much of my life changed aside from the noise. My habits and friendships remained the same.

Not three months into adjusting to my new home, several boxes still packed and appliances disassembled, I began my freshman year at Brookfield Academy, the independent college preparatory academy in the northwest suburbs of Brookfield. Field Hockey, Mock Trial and children of doctors were common at school. The prestige was at a higher level than even I had experienced in my previous neighborhood. A majority of the students lived in the relatively small suburban areas of Brookfield and Elm Grove, so while meeting my classmates, I was asked many times where I lived. On more than one occasion, I mentioned that I lived in Milwaukee and received startling responses in reply. “Oh. Is it safe where you live? Have you ever heard gunshots? Are there a lot of black people?” the classmates would ask. While I had been accustomed to this very same view of Milwaukee as “unsafe” and “different” growing up in the Highlands, a few short months ‘in the city’ had given me a sense of awe that such a stereotype really even existed. I lived only three blocks away from the so-called safety of Wauwatosa not four months ago and suddenly I had moved into a war zone. I became acutely aware of the racism that still existed. I was one of only two students from Milwaukee at the time and the other student mentioned to me that she too, had heard the same remarks over the years. It astounded us that the city we had come to know and love, the same city that houses trendy shopping, great restaurants, and fine theatres which our classmates regularly attended, would have such a dirty reputation.

Over the next few years at high school, our class and the Washington Highlands took turns at diversifying as did my understanding of the city and community of which I was a member. With the help of an open-minded Student Council and a few good Milwaukee students, Brookfield Academy expanded its long respected service program to reach Milwaukee-area needs. We worked at a mentoring facility in the inner city and participated in food drives. Once

in a while, my Milwaukee friends and I would still hear comments about unsafe neighborhoods, ‘all the black people,’ crack houses, gang wars and the like while volunteering in neighborhoods not far from our own. Sometimes it would make us laugh; often it ignited impressions of our classmates’ ignorance. I heard two or three years ago about another stir in the Highlands when a second African American family moved in about a block away from the first. I no longer have as many ties to the neighborhood but I hope that the trend continues to break tradition at least a little. When I look at the newsletter for my present neighborhood, the neighborhood directly across the street from the Highlands, it makes me wonder how such strong assumptions and stereotypes can still be present amidst the diversity of a city like Milwaukee. My newsletter regularly announces new neighbor appreciation days, diversity training and awareness, and holiday decoration competitions. I think I like being encouraged to be loud and friendly, and not always perfect.

I write, today, as a student at Marquette University, in the heart of Milwaukee. I developed an incredible appreciation for the city during those years after I moved and throughout high school, and I only appreciate it more now being in the middle of it. I will forever value the creative inspiration it has given to my stories and my art and my life. The diversity of my college, the area, its residents and what it has to offer are a world apart from the life I knew as a young child. I deeply appreciate my background and the privileges I have had in my life this far; but I feel that if I never acknowledged the great diversity that has given me a pride in my perhaps less-privileged city and my community, it would be to deny how much I appreciate what it has done to shape my identity as a student, a writer and a human.