

I'm what many would call 'mixed', with a combo of Hispanic, European, and African roots. Of these identities, being a black woman has impacted me the most, mainly since that's how people perceive me physically. At 22, I think about being a young girl and fear being instilled in me from a young age. This was from my dad, grandparents, brother, friends, classmates, and peers. This was a fear of the police, fear of discrimination, fear that others would consider me a failure and that my life would be just that, a failure. Most influential, I had a fear that if I looked away for a second and ran a stop sign by accident, I'd be pulled over, interrogated, threatened, shot, and killed, by an officer who only had one thing in common with me: fear. I feared for myself, and my family, and I even feared that one day I'd have black babies of my own that would live the same reality that caused my fear.



To me, this fear was normal. It was something my family had experienced, and I had assumed everyone understood. But that changed as I watched the media and saw reactions from others seeing another black individual being brutalized. Not everyone grew up being told to keep their license, registration, and insurance in close reach. Not everyone grew up thinking to double-check their documents before they pulled out of the driveway. Not everyone lived in fear, but I did, I do, because of the color of my skin.



I entered college as a shy person, I knew my values, but I never thought I had the voice to be someone who spoke out about injustices. I thought no one would listen, or no one would care.



Throughout college, I learned a lot about social justice. I was in courses, programs, projects, internships, jobs, etc., and one of my biggest takeaways from my learning; I don't care. I don't care how others view me, or my blackness, or my gender, or my identity as a bisexual woman. I focused heavily on how others perceived me, and as I learned the history of our country and the system that has been built against me, I realized I was feeding into what they WANTED me to think. I internalized the idea that I was the problem and that my identities were not valuable when in reality, the issues I faced were systematic.



I revisited my definition of advocacy. I evaluated *why* I felt my voice wouldn't be heard. I thought about the pushback. I thought about the things I could do with my life and my career. There was the easy way, finding a 'typical' job, making a livable wage, retiring,

and spending the rest of my life with my family and dogs. And man that sounded so good!



But when I reflected on the opportunities presented, to me as first-generation college student who was able to obtain a bachelor's degree with zero student debt and a network of peers and professionals who were willing to help me, I knew that I didn't want the easy way. I thought of my mother, who after having a baby in high school proceeded to make her dream come true and become a nurse. I thought of my grandmother, who as a black woman was told she would never become anything, and fought her way into amazing job opportunities, even with what felt like the world against her.



My understanding and acknowledgment of the issues impacting myself and my loved ones was too strong, and I felt a pull to make my life more impactful.



I remember driving home with my parents and seeing what looked like a hundred cop cars surrounding a car at the end of the street, only a block from my house. I remember my dad saying it was probably more scared cops who didn't know how to deal with a black person and blew things out of proportion. Within an hour, my brother arrived home, on foot, and explained it was him at the end of the street. It was him being surrounded by police, interrogated, and threatened. He was still in his teen years and driving home from playing basketball with a friend, only a few blocks from our house. I reflect on this moment when I find myself in fear because I know the situation would have been different for him if we lived in a world where skin color didn't matter. Where his intelligence and patience would have been respected. Instead, we live in a world where a traffic stop for a broken taillight turned into a near arrest and impounding of his car.



I knew I could continue to live in this world, or I could do something to influence change. I was already living in fear, I'd use my fear as my motivation, in my mission for people who look like me and my brother, to not have to fear. If driving to work in the morning was already such a risk, what difference would it be to risk me speaking against these injustices?



And his taillight wasn't out.

*Keionna Thomas*