

Letter of Intent and Personal Essay, UNM: Profound learning experience and how it influenced me as a teacher

I wish to teach at least two content areas: mathematics, in which I have prior background, and social studies, because I love history, and the history of science and mathematics above all. Since I am also a polyglot, I considered adding Spanish and French to the list of additional teaching areas that I would like to add in a few years, but I think that critical thinking can best be taught using math and social studies, rather than a specific language.

I have chosen to share this event, which I consider to be a profound learning experience outside of the classroom, as an experience which influenced me as a teacher for two reasons. First, this incident strikes me as an example of the damage done by fear, bias, and the use of power in the absence of mutual trust. Second, this incident seems to have set in my consciousness a deep need to understand the stories of others and their ways of communicating. Both are important, for me, in order to teach.

I was about seven years old, a fair-skinned girl of African-American origin, riding through the Lincoln tunnel, 1976, in a car driven by a young Jewish woman who was both my mother's roommate, and my babysitter most of the time. As we came to the entrance of the tunnel, a pall of fear came over her face. We were being pulled over by a police officer, a barrel-chested White man, who appeared both unhappy and menacing as he got out of his car. Although I did not comprehend the issue at the time, she clearly felt that she was being unjustly pulled over. She turned to me, the fear palpable in her voice, and said

"Now look, this cop will think you are my daughter, and that means he will think that I am dating a Black guy, so keep your mouth shut and don't make any smart alec remarks."

By that age, based on the treatment I regularly received from my schoolmates, who took me for a mixed race child, I understood the bias against interracial relationships, even in New Jersey. So, I sat, mouth clamped firmly shut, as the officer approached.

To this day, I have no recollection of the events after her words to me, but I will always retain the memory of the chilling effect those words had on me, as I realized that not only my schoolmates, but even adults whom I would never meet, hated me for my mere appearance. I came to trust and admire this young Jewish woman who took the time to introduce me to both her culture and to my own, as we listened alternately to Jewish music and records by African musicians. She opened up a

world of possibility for me, while reminding me that no person's origins were without both pain and responsibility. I believe that shared power and trust are built through cooperative learning and inclusion. As a teacher I hope to facilitate both cooperative and inclusive communities of learners, in the near future, and over the long term.

(Shira) Destinie Jones