

## **Don't Call Me That...Just Call Me American**

“Why? Because I’m exercising my right to speak up and not be in fear of the consequences of my expressions? No...**NO!** Do not try to belittle me in front of everyone so as to feel that you have conquered me.”

Ghetto. I was recently labeled as “ghetto” by someone who encompassed the notion that at that moment I was beneath her. Yet, I must say now as I evoke the comments made regarding my actions at the time her disparagement at me was merely juvenile ignorance, based upon her unawareness of the historical meaning of that word and also of my very own background.

Already as a newborn, I had to fight. I was only two days old when I underwent gastrointestinal surgery and needed to recover following my diagnosis of congenital Hirschsprung’s disease. I survived the battle and have the war marks to prove it, as through it all I was left with only a scar on my stomach. And my most recent scuffle dealt with one person’s racist judgment of me because I spoke up for what I believed in. Nobody can ever condemn my feelings because of the documents that our country was built upon which support my rights. Yet, although we have The Bill of Rights and The Constitution, there are still people who live in the past and let the shade of one’s skin determine their initial thoughts of a person.

My recent experience with the prejudices of one of my fellow classmates has me thinking. Racism is prevalent, but what has really peaked my interest is racial profiling. Racial profiling may be defined as “taking precautions against people of a certain race”, but this is actually just a euphemism for *racism*. Although in declaring our independence from England, Thomas Jefferson wrote “all men are created equal”, the whole concept of racial profiling goes against this principle. We as Americans have evolved enough to grasp the true meaning of the absolutely fundamental concept that Jefferson started so long ago, and with the help of civil rights activists like W.E.B. Du Bois and Fannie Lou Hamer, people have finally come to terms with the word “equality” and have somewhat understood its full meaning. Of course there will always be prejudiced people who may judge others on physical characteristics and conclude these people are a danger to other members of society who conduct themselves “in a good mannered way”. But what is a good manner in the eyes of law enforcement officials? To be accurate, good

mannerism is different for each officer. Most of the time, though, the victim is usually of a minority race and the officer exploits them for this simple fact.

When I was 11 years old, my dad and I were in a small suburb of Broward dropping me off to one of my friends' house. "Weeee-Woooo, Weeee-Woooo." All of a sudden police sirens sound and behind the static of the megaphone I make out the daunting words of the police officer, "License and registration, please, and step out of the car." My dad had been going 27 miles per hour in a residential area. Both of his taillights were working. He made a complete stop when he turned right at the red light. At that moment I didn't know it, but talking to my father later that evening he informed me that the officer had no probable cause for putting us in that position other than the color of our skin and that the "reason" the officer pulled us over was because the type of car my dad was driving seemed to match the description of a car that was stolen two counties away. But, when he called the police station that night, there was no such car theft record that matched the description of our car. I didn't know it then but racial profiling had made its way into my life.

It is commonly referred to as "DWB" or "Driving While Black" which encompasses a motorist being pulled over by the police and questioned, searched, and/or charged with a criminal offense. Popularized by the Jay-Z song, "99 Problems," racial profiling is embodied in the music video showing what countless young, African-Americans face any time they enter a car. The song depicts a man who was allegedly going one mile above the speed limit. When asked if he was aware of the reason he was being pulled over, he responds "'Cuz I'm young, and I'm Black, and my hat's real low?" Along with being one of Jay-Z's number one songs, it also serves to inform society of the problem with some police officers and the racial profiling that African-Americans are subject to.

If racial profiling continues, we are regressing back to a time when race determined how a person was to be treated. This sort of practice will cause activists like Martin Luther King Jr., who never got to see how his dream played out in real life, to turn in his grave. We have come to a time when Americans are not "judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" and to revert to old racist views would be inconceivable. As an African-American, I have seen the affects of racism first-hand. Many officers continue to routinely use race as a

factor that causes them to react with suspicion and take action. If society repeatedly neglects this blatant racism, it is unfair to innocent people of this race.

The solution is simple; treat others as you yourself would like to be treated. The Golden Rule should be applied when dealing with the issue of racial profiling. If everyone treated their neighbors with respect regardless of their race, racial profiling would not be the serious problem it is now. The Declaration of Independence showed how Americans were determined to live in a free country, and the Bill of Rights supports this. We cannot become a free country if we are still shackled by the chains of hatred and discrimination displayed in racial profiling.

My parents came to this country for a better opportunity. When I went to Nigeria for the first time, I saw the impoverished houses my parents grew up in and thought how far they had come. Seeing where they lived created perspective for my nine-year old self; my parents had overcome hardship and had become educated so that their children could live much better lives than they had lived. In America, they aren't afraid of going out past eight in the fear of being caught in gunshot crossfire. In America, my parents don't have to ride trains for long distances because they aren't afraid that when traveling by car, they will be robbed of all their belongings, carjacked, and left for dead. In America, my parents are able to feel comforted by the police officers who take their time and effort to perform their job correctly. Even though a small percentage of them may be prejudiced, the majority of them are great people who care for the welfare of deserving citizens.

Before the Bill of Rights, there was no formal document that upheld citizens' individual freedom rights. And until its introduction, events such as the racism I've encountered would not have any legal support to counter it.

So that day when a girl I never had any problems with before tried to demean me and make me feel dumb because she felt that she was right and I was wrong made me think of the day when the police officer thought he was right and tried to make my dad feel that he was wrong. Even though my dad let it go at the time and I was too young to understand the situation, I decided that it was finally my time to speak up. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." As a citizen of these United States, The Bill of Rights of the Constitution protects me and allows to me that I can stand up for what I believe is right.

“So don’t you dare try to bring me down. I...no, **WE** have come too far in this country for someone like you to try to defeat me. Call me ghetto all you want but I know who I am, and I don’t need you to define me. I’m an American—something I’m very proud to be.