

I Am Changed

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If you had told me what I was truly getting myself into four months ago, I would more than likely have quit this program before I started. For starters, I am an after school teacher to about 70 elementary school children. That was my worst nightmare in college. I had originally started my college career at Lynchburg College (go hornets!) as a music education major. I changed my major pretty soon after, realizing that teaching was not for me. Secondly, I am living in a church. I have always been one of those people who will not be in a church if all the lights are off. Thirdly, I am a proud Virginian. Moving to the Midwest has been an extreme culture shock. I have changed.



When we first had our meetings with our incredible spiritual companion Britani, we were all to carve a word that we were trying to achieve during these next ten months on a candle that would burn during our weekly meetings. It should not surprise anyone that truly knows me that my choice word was flexibility. I am the type of person who will refuse to “go with the flow.” I love structure. I have changed.

The major things that have changed me are the personalities of the 70 or more kids I work with on a daily basis. One of the first things I asked a certain kindergartener on my first day of work was, “What is your favorite thing about school?” This student responded, “Putting my whole fist in my mouth!” How can I argue with that? I think that is pretty impressive and I am 22. If I have learned anything about teaching inner city so far, it is that all school structure I knew and appreciated does not work here. Times have changed.

For the first three months of my job I was in charge of the fifth and sixth grades. I was thrilled to be with students that I could joke with and that could clean up after themselves. I kept thinking back to my life in fifth grade and how I was annoying, but not unbearable. This was going to be a piece of cake. I was wrong. I kept finding myself getting frustrated and yelling because they should be able to write a complete sentence and they should be able to find a word in a dictionary! I kept telling myself that something needed to change.

Every day was a new struggle. I found myself sitting in my car before work dreading walking into that building. I knew that I was going to have to yell, put on copious amounts of hand sanitizer, and repeat myself over and over again. One day, I was getting extremely frustrated due to a particular student’s lack of focus and one of my students finally asked me, “Why do white people hate black people?” That set off a change.

It never occurred to me that these kids might have an idea of what is going on with the Mike Brown shooting. It never occurred to me that every time I was yelling at them for something that I felt was well deserved, that I was just another white person talking down to a black person. It never occurred to me that maybe there was a different way to do my job. I was supposed to stop this cycle of racism, yet I was contributing to it. I needed to change.

Instead of brushing off the question, I sat my students down and talked to them like they deserved to be talked to. Instead of pretending that we weren't different, I owned up to our differences. I explained that I would never have to go through things in my life that they will have to go through. I will never have to go through having my job application tossed aside because I had an ethnic name, I will never have to worry about being watched in a store because of my skin color. I will never need to worry about my safety walking down the street in a rural town. I will never go through those things. I could not evade her question. I could only be honest. Whether I am comfortable admitting it or not, white privilege exists. In St. Louis City, white privilege is booming. We need change.

My only hope is that by the next time I write my blog in March, change has taken place here. I can change. You can change. We can only do it together.

This is the sound of one voice. One people, one voice. A song for every one of us. This is the sound of one voice. — The Wailin' Jenny's

The **NBA XPLOR Project** is a ten month service residency opportunity for young adults ages 21-30, with the purpose of empowering young adults to discern and develop a “heart for care” as they live together in simple community, engage in direct service and justice work, engage in leadership development, and discern their vocational calls to honor the various communities they are called to serve. Learn more at www.nbacares.org/xplor.