

Aiyana Knowles

Power Autobiography

I grew up in a family of five in Hayward, California, the middle child of three girls, with working class parents. My mother was a registered nurse who worked nights, and my father was a juvenile probation officer who worked days. They had worked these schedules for my entire life, to ensure there was always someone present with me and my sisters. While our grandmothers and family friends helped with childcare, one of my parents was usually always present for any school events. Field trips, back-to-school nights, conferences, sporting events, and everything in between - one, if not both of my parents were there. When I was younger I truly didn't appreciate it nor understand why it was such a big deal, but now I know that their presence was power.

There is immense power in simply showing up. However watching my parents it was always about being seen *and* heard. Whether it was a distant wave to a coach, or an impromptu conversation with a teacher when they picked us up from school, my parents used every opportunity to show the adults in my life that they were watching and paying attention. Depending on the situation, they were asking questions, advocating for fair treatment, or showing their appreciation for the hard work of my teachers and/or coaches. While this was my everyday experience, I knew this wasn't true for a lot of my friends whose parents weren't able to be as present as mine. So, when my friends' parents weren't available, my mother and father became their surrogates. It wasn't just about me and my sisters, it was also about my friends. It was bigger than us, it was about our community. They showed me how you could use your power to advocate for change and support others. They showed me the importance of the commitment to your community. They showed me the importance of showing up and speaking out.

The everyday moments watching my parents be consistent and persistent, fighting for me to have the best opportunities to learn and thrive as a young Black girl, are priceless. Every child deserves the chance to learn and play in a safe environment, no matter where they live. A high-quality education shouldn't be dependent on your address, socio-economic class or family background. As I got older, not only did I want to validate my parents' sacrifices and make them proud, but I wanted to amplify my inherited power.

Advocating and building community can be tireless work, but as long as there are children and families who look like me, who are being unjustly underserved, I will continue to show up for those who need it most.

