

Morgan Downing

Power Autobiography

As a child, I consistently witnessed people giving me confused looks when I talked. From conversations with topics as simple as what my favorite food was to more complex ones like why I favored MARVEL comics over DC comics, it was certain that the more I talked, the more likely I was to receive an unwanted look of confusion.

It wasn't until my first day of first grade that I learned the reasoning for these looks. At the beginning of class, my teacher asked us to share our name and what we were most looking forward to in first grade. When it was my turn, I spoke with enthusiasm in my voice and confidence in my answer. However, my classmates' responses did not match my positive energy. As I talked, I could hear snickers and whispers from the other students. Though many comments were made as I sat down, I remember just one that haunts me to this day. "Morgan can't talk." Though my teacher scolded my bullies, I was defeated. My enthusiasm and confidence were quickly replaced with visual aloofness and trepidation.

These feelings followed me through the first few weeks. Every one of my actions in the classroom was strategic - everything I did was to prevent further humiliation. When my teacher asked the class questions, I answered mentally, hoping the teacher could hear my thoughts. During choice time, I sat in the corner of the room accompanied by books instead of classmates. Lunch was a simple time to get through - no one ever questioned the first-grader shoveling food into their mouth instead of engaging in a conversation.

My teacher noticed my silence and brought it to the attention of my parents during a parent-teacher conference. During the conference, I overheard her use the words "speech impediment." I, too young to understand, ignored the phrase until the following day when I was asked to join an elderly white woman named Ms. K for lunch three times a week.

My lunches with Ms. K began with us talking about our days and were followed by extensive speech therapy exercises. For my stutter, I practiced slowing down when I talked, which meant thinking before I spoke. For my lisp, I practiced moving my tongue up and down when using the letters "l," "s," and "h." For my mumble, all it took was encouragement from Ms. K to build my confidence to speak firmly.

By fourth grade, I was speaking with little to no verbal impediments in my voice, but according to my white teacher at the time, I wasn't "cured." She noticed that when I spoke, I was not as articulate as my white peers, and she believed this was because of my impediment. For example, she thought I couldn't say "mad" without mumbling the "m," so instead I used "salty." There was also my use of "ain't" which she thought I used to replace "is not" due to my stutter when using "t"s.



What my teacher didn't realize was that the words and phrases I used in place of others were not because I couldn't pronounce them, it was because I chose not to use them. Instead, I found comfort using words and phrases of a language that was not normally used in the academic setting, but I believed could be.

I've always used African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with pride. It stems back from a grueling racial history when my ancestors denied a linguistic standard rooted in white supremacy. As I was raised, my parents taught me the importance of "code-switching" or understanding when and where my use of AAVE should be used in order to be perceived as the way I wanted to be. School was an institution where I knew code-switching needed to be practiced, but I refused to do so because I spoke better when I used AAVE. I was not going to let my teacher tell me differently.

One day, my teacher and I were practicing the phrase "it's a" (which I pronounced as "issa") when I finally huffed, stood up, crossed my arms, and told her I was done practicing. And not just done practicing the phrase or the other one on the next sheet, but done practicing altogether.

"Because I'm not speaking wrong. You're just not hearing right."

I remember that quote for two reasons. One, because I had a phone call home due to my "snarkiness," and, two, because it was the first time I stood up for myself and the way I talked. No longer would I let anyone correct me when I didn't need to be corrected.

Though my impediments are now nearly undetectable, I still credit them as the main characters of my educational story. If not for them, I would not have gone on a journey that allowed me to understand that the way I communicated was the best way I knew how. I believe this mindset brought me to my role here at PAVE. Because of my background, I know it is not my job to be a voice for others. Instead, I only intend to listen and understand so that I can join our members alongside them and share a message that I believe everyone needs to hear.

