

Jamilah Adams

Power Autobiography

Raised in a declining community in Ward 7-DC, I felt the absence of power all around me. Internal flames that had been dimmed or completely blown out, dreams that had been forgotten as time continued, parents disengaged as they try to make ends meet - leaving children with the responsibility to decide their own paths. I vividly remember having to choose my direction in 6th grade at the notorious John Philip Sousa Middle School, where 10-13-year-old children walked through metal detectors before being permitted into the building. After hearing horror stories of near-death fights, poor curriculum, and very, very little educational resources, I knew my strength would be tested.

And every day it was. Every day my mom regretfully dropped me off in front of the building...as I approached the doors, I would mentally prepare myself to be searched or questioned if my bag was flagged. So much commotion to be permitted into a poorly lit school with no air condition, no organizational structure, visible administrators or passionate teachers. I cannot recall what I learned that entire school year, but I can recall that this when I started to question the education system.

From being asked by teachers to make sure we are present when “the people” come to count us for funding, to coloring like preschoolers in my social studies class, to learning from 20-year-old textbooks, I began to grow frustrated and filled with questions, until one morning I got a little taste of power.

Me: Excuse me, Ms. White, can I ask you a question?

Ms. White: Sure Jamilah, go ahead.

Me: Um, I wanted to know... why are the math books from 1984 and its 2004? Has nothing changed since 1984? These books are so old they are falling apart!

Class: Yeah! (The class chimes in like they were thinking the same thing)

Ms. White in a powerless, yet frustrated tone: Well Jamilah...that's all we have, that's they will give us.

Disappointed at my teacher's response, I never responded back; I just opened the book to the page written on the board. The sense of power I felt when I initiated conversation had quickly fizzled to the lowest setting.

The summer of the following school year, my mother received a big promotion that afforded us the opportunity to settle into an affluent neighborhood in PG county, Maryland. I was ecstatic, I knew the neighborhood middle school would be a much better experience, but I was not



expecting to feel inferior to my new peers. The first few weeks of school, I listened to them boast about what algebra class they tested into, while I had never heard of the word! Once again, an alarm went off in my head telling me something was not right. I came to the conclusion that quality education was not equally distributed not even amongst blacks.

The feeling of inferiority was brief, I was determined to get on grade level and be able to join the conversation next year in 8th grade. During this time I began to find the power in my voice- in my head I became an aspiring social justice advocate. I often shared my past experiences of living in Ward 7 with my privilege Upper Marlboro classmates to provide them with fresh perspectives and to denounce stereotypes attached to individuals raised in families and communities with little to no opportunities. As each school year came and went, that flame that had fizzled to the lowest setting in 6th grade began to grow larger and larger each year afterwards because I found acceptance in my past, confidence in my academic abilities and power in my voice.

At such a young age, when my 6th-grade classmates rallied behind me as I challenged our learning conditions, I got a taste of what power feels like. Standing up for myself and receiving support for vocalizing the inequities revealed to me that sometimes it takes only one person to speak up to get the ball rolling. While I did not change anything for the better in 6th grade, I have continued to sparked thought and fearlessness in various settings. I believe in the power that each one of us holds with our voice.

My diverse upbringing allowed me to witness life on opposite sides of the socio-economic spectrum, it provided with a sense of obligation to fight for equitable education for all students, especially children in disadvantaged communities. Through furthering my education, seeking my Masters in Education Policy and Leadership and working alongside a great organization such as PAVE, I plan to impact and govern the education resources and outcomes for students in all eight wards by using the power within my voice.

