

Rachel Sverdlove

Power Autobiography

I grew up in New Jersey, in the ring of affluent suburban communities created by “white flight,” surrounding the impoverished state capital of Trenton. My hometown was diverse, both socioeconomically and racially, with folks of all backgrounds and a large immigrant community with a prestigious university right in the middle of the town. You never would have known that if you had walked into any of my high school classrooms. I attended the local public high school, a high-quality school supported by the community’s high tax bracket with talented career teachers, engaged administrators, and plenty of opportunities for electives, advanced or accelerated classes, and extracurricular enrichment.

As the child of parents with advanced degrees, I grew up in a home that prioritized education and provided a lot of academic support. How many kids are lucky enough to have parents that read to them and with them every single night so that they’re reading at an 8th grade level by 3rd grade? How many kids are privileged enough to have a dad that can easily help them with their calculus homework? By high school, I was taking a full slate of Accelerated and Advanced Placement classes and excelling across the board.

As an adult, I recognize the ridiculous privilege of this observation, but it wasn’t until my senior year that I consciously noticed or considered that all of the peers in my classes were white like me, Asian, or Indian. There was not a single black or Latinx student in any of my classes. The only places we overlapped was during our gym periods or health class. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the students in the remedial High School Proficiency Assessment classes were entirely black and Latinx – not a white face among them. I had this strong sense that I had discovered an insidious and pervasive trend, and yet I felt totally incapable of doing anything about it. I didn’t even know who to talk to about it. As I reached the end of high school, I happily accepted admission to a Predominantly White Institution and went off to college. In college, I found myself gravitating towards white spaces and activities, and avoided confronting our country’s legacy of racial bias, prejudice, and injustice by focusing my History degree on modern European history. And yet, I knew I couldn’t tolerate the status quo. I had to figure out how to do something. After a summer interning at a women’s university in Bangladesh, I returned to the United States inspired to finally take action. Even though all children in the United States have the opportunity to attend school, many don’t have access to a high-quality school with dedicated and culturally competent teachers or compassionate and motivated leaders.

I was accepted to a civic service fellowship program and a month after I graduated from college found myself at a new charter school in Ward 8. For the first time in my life, I was finally in the racial minority at my 99% Black school. I was surrounded every day by young people who had



endured more trauma in their first 10 years than I had in my whole life. We had students in 6th grade who didn't know how to read, students who had incarcerated parents, students who had lost family members to gun violence, students whose only daily meals came from the school cafeteria...the list goes on. And I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. According to my resume, I spent two years there working on special projects, operations, and community engagement. What I was really doing was a deep dive into how to do work with communities, not to or for them, coupled with a grueling crash course in cultural competency and humility. I made a lot of mistakes in that experience – some silly and trivial, and some that have stayed with me for years. I was continually impressed with the grace of the students and families that I worked with for tolerating my own ignorance and patiently educating me about things I had never been exposed to in my white bubble growing up. But what I'll remember the most was our families' determination to get the best education possible for their children despite the institutional racism and structural challenges they faced as Black families "east of the river." Parents regularly participated in meetings with educators and school administrators to advocate for their children, dutifully brought their children to remedial classes on Saturdays when necessary, and served as ambassadors for the school and the community. I was continually in awe of the commitment that our families made to finding the best education possible for their children. I'm thrilled to join the PAVE team and help parents all over DC take even greater steps towards enacting their vision for DC schools.

