

I guess it is best, as they say, to start from the beginning. I was born into this world May 27, 1986, a little over 21 years ago. To say that my experiences thus far have been remarkable would be an understatement. The memories of my accomplishments and shortcomings will last throughout my life. Everything that I have earned, from football trophies to Dean's List certificates, I have not acquired alone. Whatever greatnesses and privileges I have received, I have countless people, to whom I am in debt. Though we have been through much sadness, my parents have showered me with so much love. Everything I have and have become, is because of the sacrifices my parents have made for me, and so to them I give all my gratitude.

It was difficult leaving the comfort and security of my tiny house in Chicago to come to Wisconsin La Crosse. I wanted to challenge myself and experience life outside of my comfort zone. I was the product of one of Chicago's many ghettos and although I knew La Crosse would present a new world to me, I was afraid to be so far from the only home I knew. I never imagined the many roles my race would play on a daily basis.

Everyday in La Crosse is a new experience. Some days I slip into a routine of classes, spending time with residents, working out and occasionally I find some time to relax. However, sometimes I face some intolerance and ignorance on my campus consisting of a 95% Caucasian student body. La Crosse is also home to only 80 African American students, though I am biracial, I am considered one of them. Religiously, I hear the same words trickle from people's lips everyday, "Well, I am from a small farming town, we have more cows than people." This for some reason always seemed to be their legitimate excuse for not understanding their roommate, the international student in their class, or their professor who seemed to have an accent. Sometimes they would continue, "We used to have one black person in school, but I think he moved away." This to so many people was their only attempt and access to understanding diversity.

As one of 80 "black students," less than one percent of the student body (.8%), I have had an interesting tenure here at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse. Freshmen year I was part of the NCAA Division III 3rd place National Cross Country Team, I also enjoyed being a part of Student Senate and the following year became a resident assistant. As a sophomore, I found the courage to run for Student Association Vice President. My running mate was Billy Schultz. I trusted him and knew we would be a great team because we shared many of the same experiences. I often felt labeled and mistreated because of my social class and skin color. At a very young age, Bill lost the use of his legs and soon became restricted to a wheelchair. We ran an impressive campaign, and lost magnificently by five votes.

As I reflect on my role as a resident assistant, I take great pride in my ability to create and promote diversity programs, community service events and fundraisers many people would rarely attempt. After hurricane Katrina, I wanted to help with relief efforts but I could not take a break from classes. So instead of traveling to New Orleans, I found a boom box and a jar. I played the outdated pop song, "MmmBop" by boy band Hanson and put the cd on repeat. I posted signs under the clock tower where everyone had to walk past before class. As the music played I danced for all those passing by. Word of man spread and pretty soon the whole town knew about some kid who refused to stop dancing and playing the same 3 minutes 52 second song until he had raised \$5,000 for Hurricane Katrina relief. We kept a torture tally, and in the

end, after 7 days and 35 hours of dancing to the same tune, there was \$3,337 in that jar, going to New Orleans.

Sophomore year, I remembered how good the Salvation Army was to me and my family when times were tough and money for school clothes was scarce. One day, I realized a great way to raise money. I decided to run 100 miles in 24 hours and ask my friends to run and donate money for every mile I ran. After 24 hours and 100 miles I had another jar of money, this time some \$600 was going to the Salvation Army.

When I was assigned to Baird Hall in my junior year, I was thrilled. My first program was inspired by a couple Muslim residents. Their holy month of Ramadan was approaching and with this celebration came a 30-day fast. No food, or drink, and no sexual actions were to be indulged until sunset. I explained the holiday to my residents in a meeting and soon many non-Muslims joined the fast. Ramadan to the American residents meant a time to reflect and experience hunger and thirst in a new way, as a choice. To my Muslim residents, this meant people were taking a genuine interest in their beliefs and customs. After sunset each day, we gathered as a community to break the fast with dates and delicious traditional foods.

I won best campus activity of the month for this program. However, many people believed I created "Ramadan," and the idea of fasting for a month. Obviously, my job required educating more people and creating new cross-cultural understandings. The next year, I put on a campus-wide program with a panel of Muslim and Christian students to explain the beliefs and practices of their faith. I planned this purposely in response to the notorious "Islamofascist and Terrorism Awareness Week" corrupting nearly 100 American campuses nationwide.

I recall another struggle, when I was a freshman; my parents could not afford to take me home for holidays. I remember being in an empty hall and the pain of being homesick. The worst thing about these holidays was that I was suffering alone. More recently, I can remember my last Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years quite easily and fondly. I can remember exactly where I was, what I was wearing and who I shared these holidays with. The last two years I spent nearly every holiday at home, in Baird Hall.

Today, I make sure residents on-campus have a place to spend the weekends and holidays. Many people do not realize that international students often do not have the luxury of going home on weekends to dump off laundry and eat a home cooked meal. For these students their loved ones and that special meal made by loving hands is halfway around the world.

Each summer, I return to the libraries of Chicago and rent all audio tapes on foreign languages humanly possible. I can say "Welcome home brothers and sisters" in almost a dozen different languages. But that's my job. I work in the international hall. Often these residents leave their homes with a couple suitcases, suffer unimaginably long flights and layovers and then arrive to my campus utterly terrified and exhausted. I take the most pride in carrying their bags up the stairs and welcoming them into a 15x15 empty room. That tiny room will be their home for the next 10 months.

The most important component of who I am is remembering where I came from. I also remember trying to avoid fights on the way home from school. I felt my high school guidance counselor liked me but she kept telling me college isn't for everyone. What was trying to say, "College isn't for me." These words and every issue I have faced since are new challenges for me to overcome. Being unable to afford a car and riding my bike to school everyday built my character. Being unable to afford a limousine and riding my bike to prom brought laughs but strangely enough also acceptance.

As I began to date in college and imagine creating a family, I also began to realize that I wanted to become an instrument of peace for families and the children who may face domestic abuse. I wanted to take a step and I became a member of MUASA. As the social chair of "Men United Against Sexual Assault" I feel better about my living community, my relationship with my girlfriend and my abilities as an ally. I am so proud of the men and woman in MUASA, as we have helped promote healthy sexuality and emotional safety on our campus. We in MUASA know the first step is to raise awareness and to one day finally secure our ideology, our mantra: "Sexual Assault, not on my campus."

Even after nearly four years on a predominately white campus my philosophy on diversity has not changed. But my perception of people from different cultures however, has changed as I become more empathic and patient. Also with age and work experience, my views and expectations for new emerging leaders is becoming more nurturing. My ancestors have helped create my philosophy on humanity and diversity. To believe in diversity means to serve humanity, to protect, nurture and to confront ignorance with empathy.

As a performer in Drag Shows, an actor in campus wide performances on diversity like "Awareness Through Performance" and winner of numerous awards for leadership and diversity, I am motivated always by my philosophy given to me by my predecessors. The wise ones who came before me like Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley and the Beatles. And as Ziggy Marley proclaimed, "Love is my religion." As long as I love first and ask questions later, my life and work will bring me contentment. I did not leave my love for Chicago in my tiny house, it grows with me daily. Though accompanied occasionally with frustration there is a great deal of love in me for my university and my friends who share this institution with me. Finally, for all my brothers and sisters from all over the world who call Baird Hall their home and me their resident assistant and friend, there is unconditional love for them.