

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Roceal Duke Remembers



"We have our own culture, we have our own heritage, but the main thing is that we are people, and education is the key."

[Roceal N. Duke is the Social Studies Content Specialist for the District of Columbia Public Schools. Born and raised just outside the nation's capital, Ms. Duke recalls the differences between the white and black homes and communities.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- What media stereotypes did Ms. Duke think fit the reality of her experience with the white world?
- How did the textbooks in the 40s and 50s give a biased view of history? What are the effects of not seeing your people's history told in your school textbooks?
- What were the lessons Ms. Duke's teachers instilled in her that she, in turn, instilled in her students?
- She talks about people being accepted in society according to the lightness of the color of their skin. This kind of superficial judgment is still made today in many cultures, within a cultural group, as well as by others outside the group. Why do you think this judgment occurs?
- What is the very serious point behind Ms. Duke's lighthearted reference to the chicken boxes?
- What is Ms. Duke's "bottom line" when it comes to the responsibility of educators today?

I was born in Washington, D.C., at D.C. General Hospital, and I grew up Deanwood, which is a northeast suburb of the city. Deanwood was totally African American. We rarely saw white people unless they were the milkman or the bread man. We always thought of white people as people who were downtown.

I remember my first real encounter, close-up encounter, with a white person. My aunt and my godmother were both domestics, and my aunt took me with her to her job one weekend. The family had two girls around my age. One had the chicken pox, which she was getting over. She had the most beautiful bedroom with beautiful curtains and matching bedspread and a carpet that matched and little white furniture. I guess I was about ten or eleven, and she told me to come down to the basement with her. She had many dolls and toys. She tried to give me every toy that she had. My aunt wouldn't let me take even one. We were just kids. We played and we talked and did kid things.

I was born in the late 40s, and I grew up in the 50s, and the [white people's] houses that I saw on TV--the "Ozzie and Harriet" houses--and the house where my aunt worked reminded me of the houses on TV. I always looked at "Ozzie and Harriet" on TV. I grew up in an area of semi-detached houses. They were clean. The neighborhood was clean. Our house only had two bedrooms. My younger brother and I shared a bedroom until he went away to college. We only

had one bathroom. But that house that my aunt took me to that weekend had several bathrooms. My mother matched up my curtains with my bedspread, but it wasn't the same. She [the girl] had her own room, and her sister had her own room. She had her own little desk. My brother and I shared a desk. She had her little dolls stacked up in a window seat. Being in that house was like being in another world. There was no question in my mind that all white people were rich. I thought that all white people were rich until one day, in school, my teacher started talking about kids in Appalachia. She showed us pictures of emaciated children and children with swollen bellies.

Oh, we also were connected with white people through our textbooks, because very seldom did you see black faces in your textbooks. I didn't go to school with any white people until I went to college, but they were in our textbooks. Our teachers, however, would prepare us by showing us pictures and other things they had acquired as they were gathering information about African Americans. My favorite teacher was my fourth grade teacher--Mildred E. Green. She was also from Deanwood. As a matter of fact, she was just so cool that, in 1955, she drove the neatest car. Remember the 1955 Thunderbird? THE Thunderbird? Well, she had one. That's how cool she was. She would play music by African-American artists, bring in pictures of actors and poems and all kinds of things, and integrate them into our lessons. We would have to read books and do reports about books that were written by African-American artists. But, I didn't learn about many important African-American people until I actually started teaching in 1969.



Our schools were excellent. I mean, we didn't have the best of everything, but what we had was of good quality. I never had a raggedy book. I had very, very qualified and intelligent teachers. Several of the teachers at my high school had PhDs. They were doctors. My principal was Dr. Pervis J. Williams. How much more distinguished a name can you have than that?

Our teachers' mission was clear--to make sure that we were capable of competing with anybody, anywhere, and that we would make not only our parents and ourselves proud, but them as well. The first thing they would say--and I would repeat it myself when I became a teacher--was, "I'm not going to have my name connected with somebody who can't do this, that, or the other. You're not going to tell somebody later on in life that I taught you this. Or, I didn't teach you that." They were dedicated to making sure that we were more than qualified, because they knew we had to be more than qualified to compete. The idea of not going to college never crossed most of our minds. That's all we ever heard. You have to go to college, you have to go to college. In order for you to get a good job, you have to go to college. My mother would always say, "If you don't go to school, you're going to find yourself scrubbing toilets for the rest of your life," and I knew good and well that I didn't want to do that. My mother was also very concerned that I had a skill. So, when I was 13 years old, she enrolled me in a typing class. I thank her for that. As I perfected my typing skills, I was able to get jobs while I was in college, as well as type my own reports and not have to pay someone to do them for me.

The whole idea of separate but equal was very prevalent in the Washington area. I never felt--I can only speak for myself--that I was missing out on anything. We had movie theaters, we had restaurants, and we went shopping. Even when we went downtown, we went to stores where we knew we were going to be waited on.

Lansburg's was one of the first major department stores to allow black people to have credit. Kahn's was another. We didn't think about going into Garfinkel's [a major Washington department store], because they wouldn't even wait on you. They'd just completely ignore you. That went on for a very long time. We had people in our church who were very, very light, and they would go in and out of Garfinkel's and get waited on. So, it was complexion thing.

I remember my father ... my father was a dapper kind of guy. His place to shop was DJ (Kaufmanns?). He had to earn--believe it or not, earn--the right to shop there. He went in dressed: shirt, tie, hat, and the whole business. They were happy to serve him. But somebody else just off the street may not have been served.

Washington was very peculiar. The train station, Union Station, was the point where--as you traveled from the North--you changed trains. Until you arrived at Union Station, you could sit anywhere you wanted to as you traveled from the North; but when you got to Washington, D.C., the trains became segregated. There were black cars, and there were white cars. So, as you went further south, you were segregated into black cars and white cars. At Union Station. Where the laws are made right across the street.

[Things were different farther South.] I remember an incident. My father is from Mississippi, my mother is from North Carolina, and we would go to North Carolina every summer. Going to my grandmother's in North Carolina was always a treat, because the road trip was a special time. We didn't know why it was so special. The night before, my mother would fry chicken and make potato salad, and my father would pull the cooler out, and they'd go get ice, and we had sodas, and my brother and I would sleep and have fun and whatever in the back of the car. But, it was just so special. It's like a six-hour trip. Every summer we looked forward to it, not knowing that the food, the sodas and the water were what we had to have with us because we couldn't stop anywhere on the road to eat. But for us, it was fun. It was like a picnic.

But, one summer we went to Mississippi, and I think that's when it kind of really hit home. I was about ten or eleven years old, and my father pulled into one gas station on the road. You know, those big old cars back in the 1950s didn't go very far. We had to go to the bathroom, and the man was pumping the gas. My father said, "Well, my children need to go to the bathroom." Then the attendant said, "You can't use the bathroom." My father said, "You're taking my money for my gas, and my children can't use the bathroom?" The attendant said, "What do you want me to do, take it out? I can take the gas out." We were not allowed to use the bathroom. I was struck by the whole idea, you know, I'll take your money, but you still can't use the bathroom.

In the 1950s, I went south with my aunt--the aunt who took me to the white family's house. She took my cousin and me to ... well, it's an area near Cleveland, Mississippi, where my father was born--the town's not there anymore. We were riding on the train. The air conditioner broke in the car that we were in, and it started getting warmer and warmer. My aunt, who was very, very outspoken, said, "Well, we're moving to another car." So we got our bags and we started walking to another car. We got into a car. There were only white faces in that car. It was nice and cool in that car, and the conductor said, "You can't stay here." My aunt replied, "The other car is hot, and I'm not going to let these children suffer in that hot car." So, we sat down in our seats. The conductor never said another word to us, and we went on our merry way until we got to our destination. But at that point, I looked at my aunt, and I'm thinking to myself, "Isn't she just something so special." She talked back to this man with a uniform, with his black suit and his little black hat. We had our little chicken boxes, because, you know, you had to have your boxes, because you couldn't eat in the dining car.

There used to be comedians who would make fun of the greasy chicken boxes. These were African Americans, like Moms Mabley, who would always make fun of chicken boxes. Every time you went somewhere, you had to have a chicken box, because you couldn't eat anywhere. As you traveled south, you either brought it with you or you didn't eat. The people traveling by car or bus would have to go around to the back of the restaurant [when they stopped]. You could place your order in the front, but then you had to go around to the back to pick up your order, whatever it was. Now, to me, why is it that you could go in the front door and place your order, then you would have to go outside and around to the back to pick it up to take it with you. They would take your money up front, but they would only serve you through the back door.

[What I would want young people to know about Jim Crow is] that there were too many people who had to struggle in those one-room classrooms with no electricity or very little electricity, and poor books, and poor equipment. Now kids have everything there is: computers, books, access to transportation, and everything else. All they have to do is take advantage of these things to achieve. Also, I'd hope that teachers would remember that these are the best children that they have in their classrooms. They might be a lot different from the children they had 20, 25, or 30 years ago, but these are the best children parents have to send. They don't have any other children at home in the closet. If they had another set of children, they'd take them out and send them. This is it. So, it's the responsibility of today's educators to be as dedicated as our teachers were in educating us. Not only black children, but all children. I'd want everybody to remember that we are people. Not that we are white people or we are black or Hispanic people. We have our own culture, we have our own heritage, but the main thing is that we are people, and education is the key.