

From My Perspective

I am from Lorain, Ohio – the town that birthed Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison. A quick google search will reveal dozens of interviews where Ms. Morrison speaks of the way that Lorain shaped her. My favorite shared sentiment was this one: “I didn't really have a strong awareness of segregation and the separation of races until I left Lorain. ... I thought the whole world was like Lorain.” I felt this at my core. I lived on the southside on E. 39th Street where I played kickball with Jason Gonzales and Jason Metzger (3 shades of Jason...all in one 3rd grade class), where Mary Kolczun taught my mom to cook stuffed cabbage and where Michelle Bors (Gene and Kathy's daughter from across the street) babysat me when my parents needed a night out. Between our neighborhood and the diverse congregation where we worshipped, at 11, I was only skimming the surface of the harsh realities of the world.

Who knew those harsh realities were only 15 minutes away in Amherst, Ohio. I started 7th grade at Nord Jr. High School after my father built a house on the outskirts of Lorain but within the Amherst Exempted Village School District. I was one of 3 black students in a school of about 500 kids. By the time we hit high school where we were 3 out of 1000, I came to know what it is to feel alone in a hostile environment. The surface level friendships I had formed in Junior High crumbled as the influence of upper classmen hit its mark. Shaun, the kid I played basketball with and walked to the bus with everyday called me N***** after an argument over who knows what. A fellow Puerto Rican classmate (freshman) was violently thrown through the trophy case by a Junior football player requiring hundreds of stitches, plastic surgery, months of rehab and missed school. Upper classmen walked through the halls wearing confederate flag shirts with the statement “You wear your X (Malcolm)... I'll wear mine.” They'd yell “Throw it up” followed by a Nazi salute when either me, Kendra (Julian left by then) or my Puerto Rican classmates were in shouting distance. I fought a junior in the bathroom after he called my friend a “N***** lover” in the hall. Standing up for myself led to KKK being painted on my house and swastikas being sprayed painted on my driveway. Welcome to Amherst.

So what place do the now more than a quarter century old experiences of a 14-year-old black kid have in the context of a conversation about the hospitality industry? Like many black men and women, we have had to compartmentalize the racism that we've experienced as the residual effects have the potential to negatively impact the essential interactions, alliances and partnerships that fuel us people and professionals. To me, my story illustrates the stark difference in interactions between white people who choose diversity vs. those who live in a lily-white world. I am the only black person in most rooms I walk into professionally. In most cases, I no longer notice but I do wonder how the younger me made it through the door with all the baggage he carried. How did he do so well as he took the racial inventory of every room he walked into the way Jason Bourne looks for exit points and potential threats? How do other black hospitality professionals manage? For some reason, even amongst ourselves, I don't feel like we talk about it enough.

Here's what I know: despite the want of black faces within the hospitality industry, I've experienced a general feeling of acceptance of differences, be they in race, in sexuality, in ethnicity or beliefs. I've worked in both single family and multifamily residential construction in my 22 years with my company and hospitality has felt the most inclusive of the vast array of talented, differentiated humans working in it. From the moment I started working exclusively in the industry in 2014, I was mentored by Dana Thompson, a veteran in the industry and within our company of over 20 years at the time. Our competitiveness and drive and love of language bonded us. We worked, strategized, laughed, fought and even cried through it all. When I, a 37-year-old black man, was promoted and he became a direct report, there was no resentment, only happiness for what this meant for me personally and as a black man. Hearing how proud and accepting he was of my leadership role brought contentment to a worried mind.

In 2015 when I attended my first HD Summit, I met a procurement manager from Chatham Lodging named Kelly Shoaf at the first timers' happy hour. She was relatively new to the industry also but we partnered together and made the most of the event, she introducing me to the people she knew or had met and I, attempting to do the

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same for her. She was my advocate and having her there made those introductions and the small talk that I struggle with just that much easier.

At the same event, I met Gary Womack and Melina Garza. Gary worked for Acumen Development and Melina for American Hotel Register at the time. I had just moved to Chicago and, outside of the surface acquaintances I made playing basketball, it just didn't feel like home yet. I took their "let's get in touch when we get back to Chicago" as polite ways to exit not knowing that my friendship with these two would make me love that city. They invited me into their circle, their homes and their lives with an unearned warmth considering the brief time I knew them. I will always remember and appreciate that.

Enter Brian...G...Thornton. Nearly everyone in our industry knows Brian and everyone is better for it. He has been a trusted friend that I can turn to for advice or for perspective as he, in the early days of his career, experienced a much less tolerant and progressive industry than we have now. It's odd. We've never worked together professionally and yet at every event, we have a cocktail or two and catch up as friends and fellow black men making our way in a world that doesn't look like us.

A couple weeks prior to that personally momentous event, I attended the NEWH Leadership conference where Dana and I sponsored a dinner. I was seated next to Shelia Lohmiller. At the time, I knew nothing about the history of NEWH, or even what the letters stood for. I just knew that Dana said this organization is important for us. As the words "founding member" and "president" were spoken, it became clear to me of the company I was in. The intimidation I felt was brief as Shelia's warmth overshadowed my nerves. She told me about the challenges she faced and the reason why NEWH came into existence. I talked about the strength of the women in my life and the effect of losing the woman of all women, my mother. It got real deep, real fast. Never mind breaking bread with someone...see what sharing a tear does for relationship building.

When I reflect on Dana, Kelly, Gary, Melina, Brian, Shelia and the countless others that made my entrée into hospitality successful, I know that they are the type of allies that hopefully will make the under-representation black people feel within this industry a thing of the past. You see, they provide the positive interactions that build confidence and nurture love for what we do. They see the world for what it is and act with an exceptional kindness, thoughtfulness and openness that allows someone who looks like me to leave behind all that negativity and thrive. When someone less so attempts to incorporate a plantation tour into an event (REALLY?!) or goes on a rant about how proud they are of their "unblemished Nordic blood" (yup, that happened too) or any number of microaggressions we experience, I know I have people that I can call, "WTF" with and then move on. That is so very important.

I hope my fellow black hospitality professionals have found allies that allow them to express their individual talents and personalities unencumbered by fear or doubt. If you are such a person, know that you are needed. If you haven't, make yourself known even if you must fight through your introversion and/or awkward nature. Proactively reach out to someone that's different than you. There's so much work to do in this country but it all built one positive interaction at a time.

Jason Reynolds
Director of Hospitality and A/D
Fortune Brands Global Plumbing Group