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**Systemic Racism in an Educational System Designed to Perpetuate the Dominance of the
Social Elite:
*The Experience of the First Black Female
Lakeside School Graduate***

By Dr. Lora-Ellen McKinney '73

Madrona Tigers Have No Fear!

In 1890, Dr. Georg Randall homesteaded on the Madrona neighborhood's highest point, near what is now the traffic junction and commercial area at 34th and Union. The Randall barn, located at 33rd and Union, became the city's first neighborhood public school.

My school. My home was on a block that was once an estate. The estate house was at the southern end of the block, large and white with a portion of the estate wall surrounding it. Behind it was a carriage house, a bit spooky and smelly in which I was certain that something or someone frightening had died a horrid death, while across the street, now inhabited as a separate home, was the one bedroom former caretaker's cottage. The block had been developed in the 1930s and 1940s with lovely single family homes, 3000 to 5000 square feet, each festooned with small well-manicured lawns, magnolia and birch trees, and flower beds filled with roses, bluebells, forsythia, and an annual parade of each homeowner's favorite floral arrangement.

My house was numbered 828 33rd Avenue, a handsome white brick house, positioned second from the northeast corner. The home in which my family lived was lovely and roomy. It did not look that large from the street, but it was pretty big. Most of the house was underground. Above ground were three bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room, dining room, and eat-in kitchen. Downstairs was a rec room, and a warren of five or six other rooms. Which was quite fun. Especially because the house had a tale. It was built of materials stolen by an engineer who worked for the Bethlehem Steel Company who, when found out, went downtown, booked a fancy suite in the Olympic Hotel, had a nice dinner, left a note about

his crime, and jumped to his death. This made the house in which I lived interesting for this curious child. I was forever looking for secret passages in the backs of the built-in closets, the outside icebox, and the laundry chute that potentially held information about and evidence of the engineer's crime. I tapped on walls expecting them to open into tunnels. I sought out letters from the builder and walls that opened into unexpected worlds. There were no secret doors. No tunnels. No letters. No worlds. Though, there was a small, triangular room under the stairs in which I spent most of my time reading, writing and memorizing poetry, dramatic monologues, and Greek and Roman tragedies.

The block north of my home, directly across the corner from the house next door, was Madrona Park, a community park with a baseball field, basketball court, tennis courts, play yard, and a field house. The next block north held perhaps six homes. And there was the Firehouse Library, across the street from which was Madrona School.

My school. But no longer.

One day, I arrived at the back door of my home at 4:30 PM. Slinging my light brown oversized London Fog raincoat over my shoulder, and carrying my father's life-worn tan leather briefcase which I daily filled with books at the school library before I left the campus, I had barely eased my size 11AAAA corrective shoe-clad foot up the quick U-turn that took any entrant from the two elongated concrete steps to the three short concrete steps leading to the back door, to the wood-floored mudroom, to the yellow quail-egg speckled linoleum tile in the warm and fragrant kitchen, when two people who looked exactly like my parents announced that I'd be attending another school. In a repurposed mansion. Next to St. Mark's Cathedral. On Capitol Hill. I expected to open the door to the kitchen to the warm greeting of Mrs. Weston, our housekeeper. Normally, she was cooking dinner at this time, but had a small snack on the table for me. She would give me a hug that hurt. Her hugs made my ribs collapse inward. But it was a pattern of late-afternoon home arrival that I expected. Seeing my parents sitting at the kitchen table wearing serious faces was alarming. I rather expected them to tell me that someone I loved had died. Dinner wasn't for an hour or more. I don't remember if Mrs. Weston was even there. But my parents should not have been. They should have been at work.

Since no one had died, my diagnosis was certain. They'd lost their minds. They could not possibly have heard what they were saying to me. Mid-year, I was being removed from the Peaceable Kingdom's rainbow coalition and a school in which I was thriving to attend an independent school with three Black students, all girls? Where wealthy white parents — the 1% — paid, not tax dollars, but exorbitant tuition, to increase their children's already sizable advantage in the world. I was to attend a school with girls who, even if they were idiots, were by virtue of their parents bank accounts, going to inherit the world. And if they were the 1%, I was a much rarer breed. Yet I, with what my father called my "prodigious brain,"

with parents who were well-off and at the top of their social strata, was nonetheless constrained in my access to the brass ring by the color of my skin and the history of my African ancestors, no matter where I went to school.

I had been taught that education was the great democratizer. That it made everyone equal. That this was the beauty of American public schools. Private education made a mockery of this democracy.

“You are hypocrites!” My body stiffened as I said this. My fists clenched.

I lobbed this accusation at my parents in a forceful voice, feeling very confused about why they wanted to remove me from the gifted program at Madrona Elementary School, an excellent multicultural public school a block from my home, to attend an excellent all-white independent private school much farther from my home.

“We pay our tax dollars to ensure a good public education,” I reminded them. “Not just for me, but for all of the nation’s children. And you, Mother, are in administration in the Seattle Public Schools. You are a principal! How do you explain moving me to a private school?”

I asked my father if he had concerns that I was going to be in an educational setting that was no longer egalitarian. Or that might have egalitarian goals but was structured to serve the social and economic goals of the uber-elite. My father, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Berry McKinney, was a product of segregated schooling in Cleveland, Ohio. Importantly, he was a proud graduate of Morehouse College, a private historically Black men’s liberal arts college in Atlanta, Georgia, that was begun two years after the Civil War to educate Black men. The school adopted a seminary university model and stressed Baptist religious education. Morehouse prided itself on creating an environment in which Black boys became Black men, academically skilled, racially proud, and committed to building community and to enacting social justice. Their website states that “We are a brotherhood of men on a mission to lead lives of consequence.” His father, the Rev. Dr. Wade Hampton McKinney, Jr. had also attended Morehouse. His mother, Annie Ruth Berry McKinney, and his aunts and his sisters were graduates of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, a school for Black women, with a parallel history and goals to those of Morehouse. My grandparents met and fell in love as college students.

These segregated colleges, begun by religious white benefactors, grew out of an era in which attendance at white schools was either impossible or was an impossible challenge. My mother, Louise Jones McKinney, attended a white academy, Flora Stone Mather College (Case Western Reserve University) in Cleveland, at which only one Black female student was allowed in each class. Her attendance there was the result of racism; she had received a full scholarship that had been rescinded when it was discovered she was Black. Her father made

her attend the school to prove that she was as smart as the rescinded award indicated, and that she did not need their money. But she was too Black to stay in the dormitory, swim in the pool, ride the horses, or be shown any respect as an award-winning student. She showed them. Straight A's. Phi Beta Kappa in the Classics. And the admonition to me at age five, that I would attend college and graduate school, at parental expense, anywhere other than Seattle, a city too provincial for my academic, emotional, spiritual, and career growth. Also, my need to leave home was because Mother had not been allowed to leave Cleveland to attend Radcliffe College or Fisk University, her preferred college choices.

So why were these Black parents who believed in public education, and a mother who had been traumatized by an all-white private college education, sending me to a private all-white school?

Now, we lived in a white neighborhood, specifically, a Jewish neighborhood, that had begun slowly to sell homes to a few Black families prior to my parents' arrival to Seattle in the late 1950s. The truth was that we only lived in our family home because of racism. The home that my parents wanted, a much larger domicile on 37th off of Cherry, with six bedrooms, a wrap-around porch and direct view of Lake Washington, was perfect for the Latin scholar and the theologian, until they arrived at their real estate appointment in all of their melanin-coated loveliness. The home owner wished to sell her home to the young couple, but the real estate agent made it clear that 35th Avenue was a Red Line that she was not prepared to cross.

A bizarre sort of middle-class ghetto developed in this portion of Madrona where one had to walk to the nearest corner for a view of Lake Washington and the mountains. Madrona's inhabitants were moderately comfortable to well-to-do descendants of enslaved persons who had traveled West to escape the hardships of the American South and the children of Abraham given new life after rescue from Nazi concentration camps by American soldiers. Both groups sought freedom from the tyranny of the state and of neighbors.

Though not exactly the Promised Land, these distinctly different ethnicities worked well together in Seattle; two oppressed groups, with ethnically unique experiences of fighting against and surviving the Empire's most devastating and annihilating forces. America's Black population was largely Southern, having come "Up South" during one of the Great Migrations, to work on the railroads, at Boeing, or as part of a military assignment. My maternal and paternal grandparents had been travelers in the Great Migration, from Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida to factories and promise of the Midwest. While I was not certain what brought the Jewish families so far west to Seattle, many of those who then owned shops in commercial corridor at the intersection of 34th Avenue and Union had fading wrist tattoos as evidence of Holocaust survival. I used to speak Hebrew and Yiddish,

from years of shared seders, neighborhood conversations and attendance, for almost a year, at Herzl Day School, across from Garfield High School's sports fields.

My mother had been raised in Cleveland's community of Polish Jews; her mother worked as a domestic for the Halle Brothers, Jewish brothers who owned the city's largest department store, for whom she also did kosher catering. As a result of her Cleveland upbringing, my mother's diet was a mix of soul foods, from the American South and Eastern Europe. She ate a pungent breakfast of pickled herring many mornings, which made my father crinkle his nose when he leaned in to kiss her goodbye. "Would it kill you to eat scrambled eggs and bacon, sometimes, dear?!", he'd ask. Mother'd just laughed. While they were doing this comedy routine, I'd take my big feet somewhere far away from them. I wasn't keen to get in the direct path of Mother's pickled exhalations.

My Sundays were AM to PM, toddler-to-assisted-walking-device *Black*. I attended a 90 percent Black church, Mount Zion Baptist Church, the faith community pastored for generations by my father. I spent much of every Sunday there. I was also at church for choir rehearsals, youth activities, and various other ministry functions. My architectural home and family was in the Madrona neighborhood. My extended family was at Mount Zion on 19th Avenue and East Madison Street (now Rev. Dr. S. McKinney Street), slightly north and due west of my home in the Central Area. My friends were both places.

Madrona Elementary School was a three-minute walk from my home's back door to the school's large front wooden doors and my assigned classroom seat. Madrona had students from across the Central Area's socioeconomic and racial groups. Madrona's students were from families categorized as poor, middle-class, upper class and stratospherically wealthy. They were immigrant and native-born, and spoke the languages of their home countries, which were also taught at the school. They were Black, white, Mexican and Asian (primarily Japanese and Chinese). Students were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Buddhist.

At school, students were divided into three groups. I was in Section One, which started at 8:30AM. I went to school at 7:30AM so that, before the formal start of classes, I could take classes in Spanish, Greek Mythology, playwriting, etymology, and anthropology. Section One read the Iliad and the Odyssey when we were 9 years old. I went back to these special educational sessions at 2:30PM.

Now, I was being told by my hypocritical parents that I was leaving this special scholarly palace, a school where I wrote plays, played chess almost daily with Mr. Rankin, the principal, learned languages, knitted sweaters, had friends, and slayed at tetherball and long jump. I was to leave this place where I was successful and happy, to attend the St. Nicholas School for Girls on Capitol Hill. I'd need to take a bus. Or my father would have to drive me. I was now, at 10 years old, to be part of a socioeconomically and educationally rarified

student body, one in which the white students were from families listed in the *Social Blue Book of Seattle*. My Black family was not Blue. Even if we had enough money to be listed, we were not of whatever aristocracy or nobility that those families played at. Nor was our skin sufficiently translucent and pale for our veins to be seen blue and pulsing beneath its fragile surface. I did not want to attend this school with its blue-veined student body.

“You’re hypocrites!” I repeated this accusation to my parents. This was not how I normally spoke to them. I was a Black child, raised to be polite to a fault. I said, “Yes, sir.” “No, ma’am.” I curtsied. Low, until my front knee touched the ground. I did not sass. Sass could get you “knocked into the middle of next week.” I knew better. Frankly, I was interested in the middle of next week. Space travel fascinated me. Being sent into next week would be thrilling, though painful. But I had not a clue about how to get back. While I was concerned about being severely admonished for being a smart aleck, I was not taken to task for being disrespectful to my elders. My parents seemed to understand that attending St. Nicholas went against so many of the lessons they had taught me about the unique purpose of public education. That excellent public education was the great leveler. It brought children of all kinds together to learn academically and to learn about one another; in this way, public schools were incubators for American democracy in action. Public education was as important a civic responsibility as voting and jury duty.

Yet, the McKinneys were sending me to hang out with the 99th percentile. Now, I had been taught that I was better than no one and no one was better than me. But I knew that these folks were richer than we were, though we had far more resources than the average Black or white family. I expected that, while I had plenty of exposure to white people, fewer of them had exposure to people unlike *them*. I knew that I would run into stupidity masquerading as curiosity. I knew that I would have the burden that so many of us do, we Black students in white spaces: to be twice as good, twice as smart, twice as (fill in the blank) because whites were likely to credit us only for half of our true presentations. Or less than half. In my family, I had several jobs: to keep my room clean, be polite and helpful to my elders, be an excellent student, and to exceed the “twice as good as” rule.

I was now headed to St. Nicholas School for Girls, set in an old mansion on top of verdant Capitol Hill. Where I had to be better than everybody so that they could simply view me as almost as smart as I was.

Ugh.

Note: My Lakeside life had two phases. I was first a St. Nick student, part of an all-female student body, then we merged with the all-male Lakeside in 1971 Because co-education was a national conversation being enacted in private high schools and colleges. And because St. Nicholas had an empty bank account.

All Hail to Thee St. Nicholas!

Motto: "*Nihil est virtute amabilus,*" or "*Do noble things, not dream them all day long.*"

My Madrona neighborhood had some challenges. My father was a Civil Rights activist. When he and my mother moved to Seattle from Providence, Rhode Island, the American South was on fire. By comparison, Seattle seemed untouched by racism. No crosses burned. But Black people could not live where they wanted, get the jobs they wanted, or bury their loved ones in the cemeteries they wanted. My father pointed these things out. Yes, Seattle was a beautiful city. And compared to swinging by the neck from a poplar tree, one might decide not to complain, but there was plenty here that required fixing. My father set out to fix things. It scared the white community. A lot of Black people wished that he would simply leave things as they were.

These families would talk about their dislike of my father at their dinner tables and their children would occasionally repeat to me the ways in which they wanted my father to leave town. A couple of times, the kids started fights with me. I was not supposed to fight but I could defend myself. I carried a briefcase full of very heavy books. If my tormenters got in one lick, they'd get hit with poetry, world literature, British epics, and American historical biographies. They'd lash out in anger; they'd get bruised knowledge.

I actually got into one fight. With Stephen Smith. At recess, he had played tetherball. A wild ball had caught him oddly, and knocked him down so that, rather than crumple, he fell flat. He wasn't hurt. It was funny. Everyone laughed. When I left school by the back door that late afternoon, Stephen was at the door. He saw me and cold-cocked me. My briefcase did a brief dance all upside his head. Upon reaching home, I told my parents that I had defended myself when attacked. That was fine. I was never to be the aggressor. A while later, after dinner, the phone rang. My father answered and had an extended conversation.

"Lora-Ellen?" My father called me with his deep bass voice.

"Yes?"

"You did not tell me that you hit Sam Smith's son."

There were several problems with how my father had leveled what appeared to me to be an accusation. Firstly, he accused me of being the aggressor, when I was not. He said "*you* hit..." Then, he made the specific person with whom I had been in the fight important. The person was unimportant. I did not understand why it mattered to my father, all of a sudden, that

Stephen was the son of Sam Smith, the first Black head of the Seattle City Council. And one of my father's parishioners. And my Sunday school teacher. I was the victim (and victor). I had defended myself, I had reported the incident to my parents, and no one was hurt.

Then there was a more passive but dangerous form of aggression directed at me. One of the Black families that lived in the neighborhood, across the street from Madrona Park, were the Dixons. Daily, I walked by their home on my way to school. Many days, the three brothers, Elmer, Aaron and Michael, would stand on the porch as I passed, two of them holding rifles that were vaguely pointed at me. The rifles were down as I approached, raised as I got to the edge of the corner property, and lowered soon after I passed. The display was meant for me. I never mentioned this to my parents, though it announced itself. My mother noticed that I had painful and frighteningly bloody bowel movements. I had a bleeding ulcer. I was 9 years old.

Dr. Fred Rutherford, my pediatrician, asked me to tell him about every moment of my typical day, from awaking at 5AM, to bathing, dressing, and eating breakfast. "And then you wave at Mrs. Presley as she washes her breakfast dishes? What next? And then you look to see who is playing in the park before school. Wait. And then you speed up? Why do you speed up? You said look up and to the left? Why? The Dixon brothers are there. With rifles." My mother's eyes widened. I was put into therapy with a man with the fascinating name of Adolph Messing Gruen. Madison Park. Thursdays at 5 PM.

I don't know what my parents did about the Dixons. I don't know if they spoke to them about holding guns on me. Elmer Dixon was the founder of the Seattle branch of the Black Panthers. Founded in 1966 by two students, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the original purpose of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was to protect African American residents from police brutality by patrolling their neighborhoods. Over time, it became a Marxist revolutionary group that called for the arming of all African Americans, forwarded the Panther's Ten Point Platform included demands for guaranteed income, affordable housing, stressed an opposition to the military, particularly the involvement of African Americans in a military industrial complex with a colonial history and demanded payment of compensation to African Americans for centuries of economic and physical exploitation by white Americans (reparations). The Panthers were most commonly known for their free breakfast program, political education classes, and radical self-defense initiatives. My father actually agreed with most Panther Party objectives. The Panther Party is now considered to be among the most popular socialist organizations in U.S. history. I did not know this at the time. My trauma was personal, not political.

Part of the Panther's principle of radical self-defense was the preservation of their Second Amendment rights. They carried rifles, engaging in a core practice of armed citizens patrols. They marched in phalanx formation in front of our house, then toward Cherry, and on to

Garfield High School. Founder Bobby Seale often said that the Black man should secure his freedom “by any means necessary,” including violent means. My father did not agree with this. As a community leader, my father was known to be a proponent of nonviolence. He and Martin Luther King were childhood friends and freshman classmates at Morehouse College. Marching with guns in front of our home was meant to push Daddy to reconsider his ethical position on the potential use of violence as a strategy for securing freedom for Black people. And just to antagonize my father. And upset my gut.

Years later I learned that I was moved from my beloved neighborhood school because it was dangerous. I was correct that I was being placed in an educational palace for the privileged. Sometimes to protect their spawn, parents may forgo their politics. This is the kind of thing that a very smart kid can't understand. My brain was 15 years away from adult neurodevelopmental maturation.

But I aced the entrance exam to St. Nick. It included an interview, a non-Wechsler IQ test, a proverb-interpretation test, participation in an English class, and a school tour. I recall that there was some amazement at my scores by the person who came to get pick me up following my completion of the exam.

My mother wasn't surprised. *At all.* I had been reading since I was two years old. I read at the college level before first grade. I had a nearly photographic memory. My home education took advantage of these skills. I had to read several newspapers daily so that I could discuss them at dinner. And daily, my parents gave me poetry to memorize. Before Jesus got His due, my bedtime prayer routine was recitation of a poem by a Harlem Renaissance poet and one from the European classic canon. Whenever my parents had parties, they trotted me out in uncomfortable frilly dresses to recite poetry. So, of course, I aced the entrance examination to St. Nicholas School for Girls. Which now, as an official student, I got to call St. Nick.

I could not walk a block to get there. The school was three miles from my home. The building was beautiful. I love beautiful architecture. I spent a lot of time exploring rooms that were closed to students. Looking, in this place that was far more likely to have them, for secret passages.

As a St. Nick girl, I was kitted out in a white middie blouse, long blue wool V-necked cardigan with a pocket on each hip, navy blue pleated skirt worn to the knee, blue knee-length socks, and saddle oxfords, black, brown, or brown and white. Our uniforms also included an unusual silk tie; it was a huge blue-black triangle, folded so that there were two long strips around with a triangle at the bottom on which was placed a triangular SNS badge.

I looked like a saucy sailor. At six feet tall and 85 pounds, Afro-American me (that was then the term) determined that I was going to make the most of my sojourn at this school. My family job was to learn.

Founded in 1910, St. Nicholas was a private nonsectarian school for girls, located next to St. Mark's Cathedral on Capitol Hill. The school was named to honor St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children. According to HistoryLink.org, the school "strove to provide its students with an education that would both prepare them to pursue higher education and equip them to proceed comfortably into Seattle's upper class society."

Just slide me into Seattle's upper class. That nonegalitarian, nondemocratic thing that so worried me. In spite of my worries about the destructive role of private education, I was a good student. While I had not wanted to be a St. Nick girl, I *loved* learning there. The method was Socratic and also focused on thematic teaching. For example, if we were learning about Greece, we read Greek literature, learned Greek math equations, and put on Greek theater. Or we spent months learning about utopias. We read Thomas More's *Utopia*, *Walden Two*, Plato's *Republic* and more. We had to create our own utopias, from form of government, to sanitation, infrastructure, education and other systems. We took architecture, drafting and mechanical drawing classes so that our city plans would be excellent. This was a remarkable way to learn. And, in so doing, Section A, comprised of five students, completed the state requirements for high school graduation in two years. We were 13 years old. And it was just as well that we were done, because there were only 200 students and 24 first-year students at the school. Co-education was becoming the national rage. I got there just as its lifeblood was waning from female-only education.

I was there long enough to experience some decidedly funky things, though. The Black student who had been there when I arrived at St. Nick left. I don't recall her name. Only that she told me the meaning of the Beatle's song, *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. Two other Black girls came while I was there, neither of whom stayed. One, Angela, was a neighbor who lived on 34th and Cherry in Madrona. We rode to school together. Angela was brilliant in math. She could do complicated calculations in her brain, typically using her talent to determine percentages perfect for horse bets. She preferred the track to doing her math homework. She traded in her middy-bloused uniform for Garfield's purple and gold. Judy was a *whoosh* in the pan as well.

Why couldn't St. Nick hold on to its Black girls? Perhaps because the school was not designed with our needs in mind. Educating young women should not be race-dependent. However, there is a different focus when one is educating the bluebloods and trying to meet the expectations of their entitled parents. When a school has been magnolia since its inception, it may not even know that it is racist. It does not think about what materials are required for curricula, teaching staff, or student bodies that are diverse and flexible.

St. Nicholas gave me a full scholarship. My parents could afford to pay the tuition, but their need to protect me seemed to coincide with the school's need to diversify, even if diversification meant trying to hold on to at least one Black student.

Racism at St. Nicholas School for Girls showed up in interesting ways. My body, though fairly European, has a very small African genetic endowment upon which I sit. Miss Marmot, the physical education and biology teacher, made fun of my form. In PE class, she insisted that good posture meant flattening oneself against the gym wall with no space into which she could wedge her ruler. My gluteus *minimus* pushed me out an inch from the wall. I got lambasted for poor posture. I would walk my dancer's body away from the wall, while flat rear-ends would get lauded for good posture as they slouched away.

In biology, Miss Marmott was distracted that I talked with my hands and insisted that I sit on them. She would "tsk tsk" me if they came out from under my cheeks and, if her ruler was near, might hit my hands, asking me if I thought I was Italian.

My mother, a great tennis player, was ranked in the city. I'd often hit balls with her at Madrona Park. She had just bought me a new racquet. I thought I would join the St. Nicholas tennis team. Nope. The team played at the Seattle Tennis Club which did not allow Blacks or Jews entry onto their courts.

In Mrs. Schafer's American History class, the only mention of African Americans in our text focused on slavery. Slavery was presented as a tense but not terrible time for Negroes. They had public housing, after all. And jobs. I was not happy with the two paragraphs that misrepresented and underrepresented slavery, that did not understand our the contributions of Black people to America. That we built this joint for free. I mentioned it to Mrs. Schafer. She told *me* to teach the class. I was 11 years old. I taught the class for a week, using William Styron's 1967 Pulitzer Prize-winning The Confessions of Nat Turner as my text. Though the book is about slavery, I wanted to be able to teach why ministers have been historically important to the Black community, and that they led over 300 slave revolts. Ministers could typically read and write, though it was illegal and punishable by death, and were able, as a result, to inspire people to seek their freedom. I knew about ministers who led revolutions. So this made sense.

Libraries tended to be my favorite places anywhere. I loved St. Nick's library. It was an intimate space. I would study in its wood-paneled walls from 4:30 PM, when school ended, until 6:30 PM, at which time my father picked me up. One evening, I was studying in the library. Another student, Karen, was also studying. My back was to her. I did not know her well. We were the tallest girls in the school. She was 5'10" and I was now 6'1". For certain events, students were lined up by height, which placed me, invariably, at the end of the line.

Karen was in front of me. She was olive-skinned with kinky-curly hair that confused me. My neighbor, Phyllis, had hair like this. But I assumed that Karen was not Jewish. So, I occasionally wondered, when standing behind her, why this white girl had hair considerably kinkier than mine. But, we all started in Kenya. Genes are strong things.

Karen began name-calling. She called me a nigger 500 times if she said it once. I told her to stop about the 10th time. She kept going. She was having fun with the rhythm of the word. NiggerniggerniggerniggerNIGGERniggerniggerniggerNIGGERNIGGERniGGEEEERRRR!niggernigger. I asked her to stop a few times. I gave her ineffective death stares a time or two. Having been unable to reason with this girl, I got up and went over to the dictionary. Years ago, before one could find a world of words in one's phone, libraries had huge dictionaries on tall, heavy wooden stands. I picked up the dictionary, walked over to her and hit her in the head, three times, saying "Find. Another. Word." I went back to studying. At 6:30, my father arrived to pick me up.

I did not report this event to my parents. Karen clearly reported that the nigger had assaulted her. Our parents met with the headmaster. My mother, ever insightful, told Karen's mother that she should tell her husband that they had a Black child. As it happened, Karen's mother had had an affair with a Black man. Somehow, Karen had learned to hate Black people and herself. She never returned to the school. Though years later, she joined my father's church. Wow!

At 8 AM one morning, someone came to get me from Mrs. Schafer's class. I was being summoned by Mr. MacKeith, the headmaster. I entered the office, and received a big smile from the secretary who waved me into the headmaster's office. I opened the door to blinding sunshine, blinked my eyes and smiled at Mr. MacKeith. I made my way past his desk and sat in a chair, only to find against the far window, Aaron Dixon, my Black Panther neighbor, dressed in head-to-toe black, from beret to leather jacket to boots. To rifle.

Mr. MacKeith and I were in that office from 8 AM to 4 PM. We were not allowed to use the toilet. I urinated on myself several times, into my navy blue pleated uniform skirt and the floral upholstered chair that was unfortunate enough to serve as my urinal. Aaron Dixon was on a Marxist rant about how St. Nicholas was an academy for the elite, a category that should not exist in a society that called itself a democracy. I agreed, though I did not say a word. He thought that the building should be given to the Panthers for their educational program. Mr. MacKeith thought not. I don't remember much else. I was focused on the rifle. When Dixon got excited, he would wave it around. I assumed I was going to die. In my head, I kept saying the Lord's Prayer and saying goodbye to people I loved. It was a small list. I recited the poems that my parents have given me to memorize that day. I kept my head busy. I looked at Mr. MacKeith who, when I did, looked away from me.

Why would anyone call an 11-year-old child into an office in which there was a man with a deadly weapon? At least three adults knew that Dixon was there. Why weren't the police called? Would a white student have been exposed to such potential violence?

I did not tell my parents about this event. However, when he picked me up, my father asked why I smelled so pungent. I told him that after moving me to this school so that the Dixon brothers would not hold rifles on me while I walked to Madrona, one had shown up at my new school, talking crazy, looking like Stokely Carmichael.

Years later, I learned that my father bought a gun. He went to the Panther's headquarters and told them that he would kill anyone who ever again endangered me. There was never another Second Amendment march in front of our house. No more guns pointed at me.

And there was not enough money to keep St. Nicholas running. I wanted to go directly to college. Or to go to Interlochen Arts Academy (now Interlochen Center for the Arts), for dance and theater, in preparation for Juilliard School of the Arts. My mother said no.

The Lakeside School

Four of the five of us who had been in the top track at St. Nick and had finished high school in two years transferred to Lakeside. One student went to the early admissions college program at the University of Washington.

I took an odd assortment of classes. Physics. Psychology. Dance. Various English and French classes. Mainly, I wasn't on campus. I worked at Harborview in Laboratory Medicine, drawing blood, running blood tests, and assisting the pathologist with autopsies. I was the first African American page for the first Chinese Representative in the House of Representatives in Olympia. And I was sick a lot.

Though we did not know what diseases I had at that point, we knew that I was terribly ill all of the time. And here is where the racism of the Lakeside faculty comes in. I recently found my grade reports. They were peculiar and surprising for a student who knew her IQ, knew the grades she got on papers, but had not seen her report cards until a few months ago. The reports sent to my parents said that I was sick a lot, but did not ask how they could be helpful. The reports said that I had been out for a semester, could not be expected to catch up, so should probably not try. It was not acknowledged that I did not even need to be in school. I had fulfilled my requirements when I was 13, but my mother would not let me graduate until I was 16.

No teacher gave me work to do while I was out sick. When I returned to class, there was a general consensus that it would take me months to catch up, so I could not possibly do the work I missed and manage the classes to which I had returned. I completed the semester's missed work in about two weeks. Then the teachers complained that my work was fine, but not up to its regular standards. But no one helped me. No one asked about me. No one cared.

There was a repeat of the St. Nick history class with no African American contributions outside of slavery. Again, I was told to teach it. I was 14. This time, I used the WPA Slave Narratives, directing the students to read the narratives aloud, imagining the people whose lives were recorded. What did their voices sound like? How were they dressed? How did they feel about family? What did they feel about white people? The readings were done twice, first in small groups as cold readings, then following group discussions based on the noted questions, as dramatic presentations that embodied the people.

I would talk to headmaster Dan Ayrault from time to time. I liked him a lot. I felt about him almost the way I felt about Mr. Rankin, my principal at Madrona Elementary School. His office was open to me to chat, though we did not play chess. I thought he found me intelligent and charming. One day I told him that I wanted the school to celebrate Dr. King's birthday. That was the end of our relationship. He told me to get 50 percent of the student signatures. I got 90 percent of the student and faculty signatures. Then he said that I would have to wait until the state acknowledged the holiday. Before that happened, he told me that it would have to be a federal holiday for Lakeside to acknowledge the day. I had been excited about planning an event for the school. It would have included my father, who was the only person anyone in Seattle would ever likely meet who was King's lifelong friend. Mr. Ayrault kept moving the goalposts. I realized that he did not really value me in a way that was meaningful to me. He did what white people do: set up tasks they think a Black person will find impossible, then when you do the impossible, they change the rules.

My St. Nicholas-Lakeside education gave me important lessons, most of which were not connected to the educational curriculum. I worked hard, contributed meaningfully, and tried not to take much personally. I did this, not believing in private education. The cover story of the April 2021 Atlantic Magazine shows a golden school desk. The article's title is this: Private Schools Have Become Truly Obscene. The article talks about most of what I experienced, and focuses on how changes in our society have made ascension of private school students in the 1% less of a given.

So, here's to Lakeside's first African American female graduate. A toast to the racism inherent in the system that I experienced and survived. No one noted my landmark role in a celebratory way. That was fine. I did not want to be celebrated. I wanted to have been acknowledged and supported and protected while a student. When my parents allowed me to graduate at age 16, I marched across the gym stage. We'd had a marvelous speech about

Franny and Zoey. We were given cans of Consecrated Chicken Soup. I was not ecstatic in the ways that are seen at graduation. I was not as happy as my sunshine yellow dress might have communicated. I was done. I just wanted to go.