

Carolita Joseph '10, February 14th, 2023

First and foremost, I am so honored to be here and to share my experience about my time at BHS. It truly was a formative period in my life. I am even more elated that I get to share my experience during Black History Month, which is a time-honored opportunity to celebrate Black excellence and our central contributions to the world.

A little bit about me, I was born and raised in Bermuda. I had very humble beginnings, having been raised by a single father and growing up in an area that is lovingly known as “back of town”. My grandmother had picked me up from my primary school at the time, drove me to BHS to take the entrance exam and when I stepped foot out of the car, the little girl in me was struck with an instant inner knowing that I wanted to be here. I couldn't explain it, perhaps it was the well kempt lawn, lack of boys bothering me on the playground, or everyone making nice with each other.

I enthusiastically took that entrance exam, then left, where I wished, hoped, and prayed that I would be good enough or smart enough to get into the school. Well as fate would have it, I was accepted, but then the reality of my socioeconomic situation soon caught up with me. At the time, my dad and I had not been notified whether I would get a scholarship or not. It appeared as if my dream of going to this school would not happen. I cried and cried some more. I constantly checked the mailbox to hopefully find a follow up letter but all I came to find in there were bills, and even though I was paying none of those bills, I understood every adults' dismay at receiving bills in the mail. But as my grandmother always told me “God has plan”. A plan he had indeed. We eventually got another letter in the mail that I had been offered a scholarship to start Year 7 next term.

On my first day of school, my grandmother dropped me off and as I got out of the car, she said something to me that I kept in mind throughout the day. She said: “Carolita, you deserve to be here like all these other girls.” I soon realized why she tried to instill this bit of wisdom in me. I met my classmates and discovered their backgrounds, they were children of lawyers, executives of insurance companies, bankers, a part of well-known Bermudian families. Knowing her only grandchild all too well, she knew that I would feel as if I didn't belong here when the disparity of my upbringing to my peers was all too apparent.

Fast forward a few years, though I no longer had my grandmother here with me on Earth to give me her wisdom, as she passed away shortly after I completed my first year at BHS, I somewhat settled in and found my way. I excelled at my academic studies, joined the track & field team, and though it took me a while I found comfort in a few new friends.

Before we left for the summer break at the end of Year 9, Ms. Parker would announce the next student leaders for the school at our final assembly. She always announced Head Girl last. In wonderful Ms. Parker fashion, she gave a long dramatic pause after saying “and your new Head Girl for next year is.....” What amounted to probably 30 seconds felt like five minutes. My hands turned clammy and the hair on every part of my body raised. She finally said my name. I gasped for air, my hands covered my mouth, I froze in place, but then eventually made my way to the podium to shake Ms. Parker's hand. I am pretty sure I hugged her because I was so, so happy.

To this day, it is a memory that can bring a tear to my eye. Let me explain. I don't go around introducing myself to people as Carolita Joseph, former Head Girl at BHS. I was not the Premier. But you see when I was a little girl, I commiserated over my own worthiness. Despite being so young and not even having experienced life fully yet, I felt my inner monologue always worked against me. In my heart of hearts, I wanted to be Head Girl, I wanted to lead my peers, but I told myself there was no way someone who came from public school, was on serious financial aid could be Head Girl. Who was I to even have such a title? To this day, I wish I could have told my younger self that you are not characterized by your circumstances, but I have the honor and privilege to tell you all that today. This is what I call a full circle moment.

A sort of shift in me happened after I became Head Girl. I gained a bit of confidence. I decided that from there on out, I was going to emulate the end result and not the process. The process is not glamorous, but

I still could emerge becoming all that I was meant to be. The process is challenging, but I still could reach my highest potential. The process is overwhelming, but I would be more powerful. I held onto an inner knowing, a fierce determination that I was going to be somebody. That was my fire and it ultimately carried me through the path of getting my heart's desires. You see, we all have that same fire, we just discover it at different points in our lives. My hope is that you all find your fire. It is part of the most important work you will do as a person.

After leaving BHS, I would go on into the world, taking all that I learned within those four walls during those 7 years. I went to Penn State and pursued degrees in accounting, where I now practice at the KPMG Philadelphia office. I am a Certified Public Accountant, and I primarily audit financial services clients, such as private equity funds, hedge funds, etc. So, what do I do as an auditor? By the way if you don't know what an auditor is or does it's okay, I still explain to my friends and family what I do on a day-to-day basis. The other day I was catching up with my best friend of almost 20 years, Chantel, and she was asking me how work was going. I was like it's extremely busy right now but I'm managing. Then she sends me this meme on Instagram about not knowing what your best friend does. And it was very funny to me because I've worked at KPMG for so long and she was like *"I know you look at numbers but like what do you actually do on a daily basis, I couldn't tell you"*.

As an auditor, I help to protect the capital markets by ensuring that a Company's published financial statements are accurate, appropriate, and reflect the true economics of the business. For example, when our parents have been putting away for retirement, they put their money into certain investments, my firm ensures that those assets exist and are reasonably valued with the goal of protecting investors and minimizing their loss. So that we can ensure our parents don't lose their nest egg for when they want to retire in Florida.

Client service is an important and probably favorite part of my job. We do love to keep our current clients happy, which often involves going out on to the course for a round golf, much to my disappointment. I have a set of clubs but ask me if I know how to properly use any of them. But it also involves negotiations, going out to make proposals to new clients, networking, and the like.

I have a very fulfilling career, and I worked hard to get promoted over the years. My department is still very male dominated and extremely underrepresented as it pertains to Black women. To give you the statistics, I am the only one, and currently am trending to be the first and only Black female partner in our business unit. So here I am again at my firm, realizing that I was different, how I would I now respond? Well, what I love about life, is that no moment is wasted. So, every moment at BHS, good or not so good, was meaningful to me at some point later in life. I am going to summarize in just a few points some of those lessons from BHS that still help me to this day:

- *Most importantly, "What you want, you already have within you"*. Often, we think that we must be fully formed to be ready to pursue anything. We go searching outside of ourselves for the very thing that we already have. The reason this is so important to me to emphasize to you all is that when you remind yourself that what you want you already have within you, it allows you to see that you are always enough. Who I was after I became Head Girl was already a person inside of me, I just had to shed layers of disbelief and outdated value systems and dispel outside voices telling me otherwise. You may not see the whole picture and that is the consequence of having a dream, but you can try your best to mold the instances. There have been several times on my journey where my feet were not always firmly planted on the ground, but I went forward anyway and what I needed found me. There have been times where I had to believe in myself before anyone else did, but I did not let that hold me back from being my biggest advocate. If I waited for the external validation or support of others to go after certain opportunities, I might have been waiting a while.
- *The other lesson I want to emphasize is as I stated earlier, you are not characterized by your circumstances.* A little bit of my personal journey: I have divorced parents. My mom unfortunately suffers from schizoaffective disorder. My dad did not finish high school. A lot fell on me as a kid. I had the very basics, but everything else I went out and I worked for it. Saying all of this to say that

you can always stand up to the influence of the outward conditions of your life. Despite the ways life felt unfair to me growing up, I made, and I still make the conscious choice to have a lot of gratitude for what I did go through and find the good. For instance, my dad may not always have been able to help me with my homework, but he got up every day at 6 a.m. to go to work as a landscaper and taught me everything I know about work ethic. My mom every Friday evening for many years, takes a treat to and sits with her mother at the homestead, she taught me so much about being kind, making people feel special and included, given her own experience with exclusion because of the stigma surrounding her mental health.

- *So, the last thing I'll say that I've learned from BHS is that how you do anything is how you do everything:* BHS was academically rigorous and commanded excellence of its students. There were no two ways about it. BHS encouraged me to set and hold myself to a standard for the way I carried myself and the way I did things. Whether it was an interschool track meet, donor event, or my IB exams, it didn't matter, how I prepared determined how I showed up. So, what I am saying is that the small stuff counts. It is the work that no one sees. It is the work that doesn't get the glory. The dream doesn't come to you, you must go to it. The "small stuff" is often doing the things we'd rather not, but the "small stuff" contributes to the creation of the life you choose to live. I don't want you to confuse this with always having to be "on" or having to be "perfect" because there are certainly days where my "best" looks different and I can't reach my optimal capacity for whatever reason. But what I mean by this is developing a certain level of discipline and grit as you work towards a goal because you should be very intentional about your life. For me, I really care about how I not only show up as a professional but also as a person. Yes, I take my career seriously. But I also take things like being an aunt, a confidante super seriously because I don't want to settle for not being purposeful or having meaningful interactions in my life. The people around you will feel that too.

I know I have talked a bit today about my time at BHS and my career path, but I don't want you to lose sight of something that you can learn while still at the school, that is the importance of the friendships and the sisterhood you are building here. The tangible accomplishments are wonderful, but there is so much value in the intangible, a lesson that I continue to learn as venture into my 30s. You are all brilliant and talented and will acquire many accolades, but when the dust settles and the applause fades, who you are to the people around you really matter, which includes being a great friend.

You may or may not have noticed that there are some other attendees on the Zoom call aside from me. These women are my best friends in the entire world, all of whom I met at BHS; and they have taken time out of their day to support me. We've traveled together, I've been in their wedding, I am an aunt to their children. There is no shortage of love or support when it comes to them, and I am very empowered and inspired by the women they are. Day in and day out, they remind me of who I am, and most importantly, they keep me honest.

You are all going to go on to graduate or maybe you are going off to boarding school but:

- Be proactive in keeping in touch with the women you choose to surround yourself with. In your tribe, each of you will have an arsenal of different skills that you can tap into at various points in life. Your friendships can be a safe haven. I've gone through many personal tragedies and have leaned into the women you see on this call. I think there is so much joy to be found in having and being a great friend.

Thank you all for your listening ears today! I think we will have questions now.