

Roundtable News

“Racism doesn’t require hatred, it requires only ignorance”



It’s not every day that a speaker on educational issues moves audiences to tears, but that’s exactly what school consultant Erin Jones (l) pulled off, not once but twice, during a presentation on interracial tolerance on February 9.

Jones, her life resting on three pillars—family, basketball, and the work of

racial reconciliation—has a remarkable story to tell. Her central message is the importance of storytelling in breaking down human barriers.

Rejected the day she was born. One of the emotional high points of her presentation came early as she described being rejected by her White mother the day she was born. “My mother birthed me out of her body, left me in a hospital bed, and walked away. . . . On my birth certificate under ‘name’ it says ‘Negro.’”

Jones never met either of her biological parents and was sent immediately to a children’s home, from which two White parents from Minnesota adopted and raised her.

Earning more than one million votes. From that unpromising beginning in the hospital, Jones went on to stunning accomplishments. Among them, winning more than one million votes in a statewide race for the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in the state of Washington, a race lost by less than one percent of the vote. She was the first Black woman in the state to run for statewide office—and remains to date, the only one ever to do so. “I’m really glad I lost,” says Jones. “I got

enough votes to realize people liked me, but not enough to wind up in the middle of the pandemic facing the hard decisions you face every day.”

A walking disruption of narratives. “I’m a walking disruption of narratives,” smiled Jones. “People look at me and see a tall Black woman. They don’t know I was raised by White parents, play two instruments, speak four languages, and played basketball for 40 years and in 12 countries.”

Mixing with the rich, famous, and powerful. Nor do they know she sang with John Denver, was dunked on by Dr. J., met the wife (Jehan Sadat) of the president of Egypt (Anwar Sadat), served as Barbara Bush’s host for a day, tried out for two WNBA professional basketball teams as a young mother, and captained an American women’s team that played the Mexican women’s Olympic squad.

Although the parents on her adopted father’s side (Jones’ grandparents) welcomed her to the family after several months, her adopted mother’s parents could not see past Jones’ color. The racist treatment of Jones and her parents in northern Minnesota drove the father to announce out of the blue that they were moving to the Netherlands. There she enrolled in the prestigious American School of the Hague, which served students from dozens of nationalities, including the sons and daughters of ambassadors from the United States and the likes of Israel and Palestine. It was in that environment that she got the opportunity to rub shoulders with Denver, Sadat, and Barbara Bush.

A single sentence can raise you to the heights, or plunge you into the depths. At a dinner with students from the school, Jehan Sadat asked how they planned to change the world. Fourth-grader Erin immediately announced that she would broker peace between Israel and Palestine.

Sadat didn't dismiss her. "You," said Sadat, "are a world changer." Elated, Jones set out, as a child, to live up to Sadat's praise.

Enrolled at the prestigious Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, Jones sank into depression after a woman walked up to her on campus and announced "You know, you're only here because we have to have ten black girls to qualify for government money." A week later, White male students from nearby Villanova University, shouted the N word at her as they drove past. "When the basketball season ended, I had no community to support me. I just started dying."

The need to talk about racism. While still at Bryn Mawr, the opportunity to play pickup basketball with Julius Irving helped pull Jones out of her clinical depression. It set her on her life's work. Sitting on the sidelines with three Black teenage dropouts from Philadelphia, Jones asked them what they expected in their future. The answer stunned her: "We don't expect to live to be 21. Why would we dream about the future?"

She decided to remain in the United States and become an educator and a "champion for kids who look just like me."

We must talk explicitly about race, she argued, "because I think in this country we avoid it at all costs. We don't want to say the wrong thing. And so we just don't talk about it. We are where we are as a really divided country because we haven't been willing to get comfortable being uncomfortable. I do not talk about safe spaces. I don't think it's ever safe to talk about race, I talk about brave spaces. And we need to push through our discomfort. We ask our students to be uncomfortable all the time. We have to model that at the top."

Cleaning out a festering wound. Indeed, she argued, the situation is "not getting better, because we've avoided talking about racism. We've covered it up. The storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6 just peeled the band-aid off. It allowed us to see the festering wound. We all know that dealing with infected wounds requires cleaning out the infection and taking antibiotics." That's what's required to deal with the original sin of racism in

the United States, she said, suggesting that a Truth and Reconciliation Commission similar to South Africa's would be a valuable start.

Meeting Grandma.

And then the second emotional high point of her presentation arrived. Given an opportunity to speak in Minnesota, Jones sought out a first meeting with her birth mother's mother, her maternal grandmother.

When she arrived, she found that her elderly grandmother, eagerly awaiting the visit, had been in tears all day. From a shoebox, the grandmother pulled out clipping after clipping about Jones' career—items sent faithfully to her by Jones' adoptive mother, month after month over the years.

Of all their grandchildren, said Grandma, they were proudest of Erin. "Your grandfather went to his grave and never got to tell you he loves you." The grandmother's message was that they didn't know how to tell her, because, after all, she was (the N word). "That's when I realized," said Jones, embracing the elderly woman who had loved her from a distance and was to die within months, "that racism doesn't require hatred, it requires only ignorance."

Discussion

Three takeaways emerged in the discussion that followed: (1) A national need for an honest discussion about racism. (2) Dealing with the "scarcity argument" that progress for women and people of color threatens the status of White men. (3) Supporting those pockets of people eager to begin cleansing the racial wound.

An impressive TED talk from Jones can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/y2no7n3z> Jones also provided resources for superintendents interested in this work in a Powerpoint presentation here:

<https://tinyurl.com/yykzwr6>

