

## CULTURE SHOCK

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When I entered the Prince George's County School System in the third grade, I was tested and placed in the TAG (Talented and Gifted) Program. My reading was below grade level, but I excelled in mathematics. It was at Chillum Elementary that I first had white teachers. I'd never felt the real difference between races, other than skin color and dialogue, until I witnessed my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Brussard's reaction to the O.J. Simpson verdict. That was a wow moment for me.

Ms. Maida, an Italian, Catholic, long-distance runner and chain smoker, was one of my favorite math teachers. The year I was her student, I scored perfect on the Maryland Functional Math Test, until they decided that too many of us were getting perfect or high scores and made us retake the test. I got two wrong the second time.

I was placed in algebra my seventh-grade year at Hyattsville Middle and that's where it happened. Up until this point my classmates looked like me, but for the first time I'd be of the minority. I was one of five children of color and the only black male from this country. Though we all spoke English, it was like the white children spoke a different language. Even the interaction with the teacher, a white woman, was something I observed to be very natural for them, but left me feeling like an outsider.

I could also tell that these kids were of another class. They were from University Park and seem to come from money. One of our required school supplies was a Ti-82 calculator and it cost a little over \$100. I'm still thankful for my cousin for the hook up because without her I don't know if my mother would have been able to afford that purchase.

I also learned from one of my two Jewish classmates that they didn't believe in Jesus. I was baffled, like, "What do you mean you don't believe in Jesus?" B.C.E. (Before Common Error) is what I learned from my Jewish Social Studies teacher, who definitely shared closeness with those students. I regret not attending the Bar Mitzvah that I was invited to because I'm sure it would have been an interesting experience, but at the time I thought it would have felt like another place that I didn't belong.

I would hear my classmates discuss which high school they'd attend which would offer the education most beneficial to their future. I just thought you went to the school in your district or jurisdiction. They were already planning for their future. I felt so behind and out of my league. I did poorly in math that year, a subject that up until that point I thrived in. Next year, in geometry, amongst my peers, I did well. I'm still not strong in algebra and this affected me in algebra II / Trig. I'm still not sure where University Park is located. I grew up in the town of Chillum in Hyattsville, Maryland. I know the area fairly well, but maybe only where the Blacks and Latinos live. My eight-grade year I would go on to experiencing a white man

calling me nigger while choking me and my first stop and frisk, both of which made me feel helpless, yet the police made me feel criminal.

I tested well enough to be admitted to two local private schools, Archbishop Carroll and De Matha. Carroll is an all-black school, while De Matha is the more recognized all male school. The majority white demographic of De Matha that I experienced at their open house was intimidating and reminded me of my seventh-grade year. I didn't go to either school and settled for the school in my district even after I no longer lived in it.

The psychological aspects of all this have really made an impact on me and brought an uneasiness and pressure in my chest as I recalled the events. As I serve my term in prison, I wonder what may have been if I had felt comfortable, had better support or didn't feel any different. There are several different possibilities, possibilities that I sure my seventh-grade classmates have gone on to realize.