Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway!

My Bryn Mawr School MLK Day Presentation

Michele Leslie Eubanks Abdul Sabur, Class 1969

Thank you for inviting me back. I am honored and humbled to be before you today. I thank my family for encouraging me to come back to Bryn Mawr.

Much of my education in the 50’s and 60’s was during the time of segregation in Baltimore. I knew there were stores, restaurants, and other places I could not go in. I knew white people thought they were automatically superior to me. I lived in a segregated community and went to Samuel Coleridge Taylor elementary school across the street from my house in West Baltimore. Because I was intelligent and may have a future, my Principal, Mr. Jones worked magic to get me accepted into a white school near Patterson park that had a speech therapy program that may help me with my stuttering. In my school across the street, the board of education did not see fit to provide special services like that. So, in fourth grade, my first experience of being educated in a hostile environment began. It was the first time I was called the N-word and the first time I felt afraid in a neighborhood. Always curious and wanting to do better I went.

When it came time to go to middle school in 1963, I went to Booker T. Washington Jr. High School, a loving supportive all Black middle school. I was in a group called TNT, Training Now for Tomorrow and it was under the direction of Marist Ross, a white woman from the Ruxton area. Much credit and praise is due to Mrs. Ross and Bryn Mawr’s leadership at that time for their vision in integrating this school with us.

Erselle Datcher came to Bryn Mawr in 1965. Clara Fletcher, my best friend and I came in 1966. What I loved about Bryn Mawr was that I could learn anything! I loved reading and analyzing books. My favorite classes were Art History and Latin. At Bryn Mawr, I also learned that high socioeconomic status was not a guarantor of success or happiness. I learned that there are white people who are willing to TRY to be allies and friends. There were a few more Black girls from TNT who came to Bryn Mawr after me. Around 1968, we developed the “Soul Table”. We would gather at lunchtime, to talk and support each other. Although some white students joined us, this caused great anxiety for some at Bryn Mawr.

Even with the love and appreciation I felt for Bryn Mawr, there was the flip side that made me long at times to leave and go to Douglass High School. I loved Latin and became good at it. One semester, I expected an “A” on my report card. But, my teacher could not give me the “A” I deserved. Instead I received a B++. There were only six of us in the class and a classmate who I know did less well than I did got an “A”. When I had a physical exam, my gym teacher automatically assumed I had flat feet and was shocked that I did not. When I was accepted into Syracuse University on early decision and my classmate was not, a fellow classmate declared, “we’ll, colleges now have to take THEM if they want to receive federal money”. No credence at all given to my own merits. I was never called the “N” word like I was in elementary school. But, I did learn about subtle hidden racism; diminished expectations, and the power of words to strike at the very core of your spirit and wound you. When Martin Luther King was killed, in 1968, I literally could not come back to this school of white people for a few days. I had to regroup and rebuild my armor to go forth again. When I returned, no one in school said anything about

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Dr. King’s death to me, except at the “Soul Table”. Years after graduating, I noticed that in my own year book, none of the Black maintenance people were given the respect of a title of Mr., Miss, or Mrs. But, the white faculty and staff were. I regret it to this day. They were much beloved, but obviously not respected. All in all, it felt very lonely at times to live between two worlds and not fully belong to either.

As tough as those years were, I would not have changed coming to Bryn Mawr for anything. I wanted to learn and to do better. I am proud of that young Michele who felt the fear and did it anyway. As I wrote in my “Mélange” article in 1969, I left Bryn Mawr as a Black and Proud young woman.

My message to the Bryn Mawr students is to fully embrace your girlness and your time in this beautiful academic cocoon. It does not matter how you got here. This experience is yours and you are tied here together. Revel in using every means necessary to find out who you are- your strength and challenges; stretch yourself to learn and share something new and different not just intellectually but within the richness of the diversity of life experiences now in this school. Every one of you bring things of value and importance to help create the viability of this space. **Realize that you BELONG WHEREVER you have decided to put your feet!** Allow others to be in peace and dignity. That will never diminish you.

When you move beyond your girlness and graduate as a young woman, approach the world and all its people with excitement and an open heart and mind. Your time here at Bryn Mawr would have prepared you for that.

My last words to all of you is to, **Feel the fear and do it anyway!**