

Jane Feldmesser

Power Autobiography

I grew up in the suburbs of Milwaukee. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country. Just a fifteen-minute drive meant different economic opportunities, different public schools, different access to quality groceries, different quality of housing, and more. North of the city, I was guaranteed access to some of the state's highest achieving public schools. These schools were full of colorful decorations, a myriad of books and resources, and highly qualified and experienced teachers. My privileged experience created baseline expectations that I had for every school system. I soon found out that my experience was an outlier in the American public education system.

I was surrounded by the same people in elementary and middle school. Once I got to high school, many more feeder schools were involved, and I was a part of one of the most diverse school populations in the state. But in my classes, I was still surrounded by the same people that I had grown up with and others that looked like me and were from similar backgrounds. Throughout my four years in high school, there was little movement of people who joined honors classes, so, once again, I was surrounded by the same people all four years. My school, and many other schools, labeled your intelligence and academic ability with a rigid class placement. It wasn't until I stepped out into the hallway that I saw all of the school's diversity. From that, I learned that diversity does not mean inclusion.

As I progressed through high school, I started to ask *why* a lot. I wanted to know *why* my school was so separated by leveled academics and *why* did I only see this diversity at lunch or in the hallway. I took a lot of my questions to college where I studied policy, political science, and economics. The more I learned and researched, the more I learned about policies that were intentionally and disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Each policy I learned, like the Federal Housing Administration, directly related to the current segregation in Milwaukee and in many other cities. These deliberate policies have driven systemic racism and have created a significant power imbalance among people. The pervasiveness of these policies and laws have impacted nearly every facet of a community, which deeply affects the access to and quality of public education and a student's ability to succeed.

My college education taught me that I had power in my education system all along. There was not one particular moment where I realized the power that my parents or I had. The intentional policies established my family's and my community's power to being guaranteed a quality education. We never had to question or acknowledge the existence of our power because that was built into our privilege while living in the northern suburbs of Milwaukee.

Even though I was studying the United States' history of blatant racism and learning about communities outside of my own, I still found myself gravitating towards predominantly white



spaces with people who had similar backgrounds. I questioned my ability to effect change if all I had was the knowledge of these policies, without learning the experiences of many marginalized communities. Could I really be an effective and an intentional researcher if I continued to study behind closed doors at another Predominantly White Institution?

I knew that reading and researching were not enough. After I graduated college, I joined the AmeriCorps where I served as a Literacy Tutor at a DCPS elementary school. Even though the school was in the Logan Circle area, the student population was majority Black, Latinx, and low-income. The school's emphasis on family engagement taught me a lot. I witnessed the determination of parents to ensure a quality education for their children. Their willingness to take metros and buses to get their child to school each day, their consistent communication with teachers, and their continuous advocating for their child's success demonstrated what shifting the power to parents and families could lead to. Many of my students' confidence in school grew dramatically, which led to higher achievement and participation in school. This shows, when given the right resources and properly distributing power to families, children thrive.

I'm incredibly passionate about shifting and redistributing the power that my family and I had in my education to every child and family. I'm working towards taking more responsibility for this intense privilege that I have and shifting my focus towards learning from and listening to community members. I am incredibly excited to have this opportunity at PAVE and to begin dismantling the consequences of these intentionally harmful policies by amplifying the voices of parents and families across the District.

