

Hannah Chichester

## Power Autobiography

On average children spend about 50% of their year in school. I don't remember much from my childhood, but the memories I do have are mostly from the 1900 days I spent in school. School was the better half of my childhood and was my oasis from my stressful home environment where my single mother was barely making it by. As an identical twin, my sister Sarah and I were already made to feel guilty at a young age for the financial stress of having twins. On top of this, my mother remarried and had two more children, my younger siblings, who became my responsibility at a young age. All the stress was put on my sister and I and caused a very traumatic upbringing, something all too many children have to deal with. Despite all of this, I had two better halves - my sister and my school life - I could be myself and thrive.

I was born in Denver, CO and grew up in section 8 housing on the west side, less than a mile from Mile High Stadium. While I could hear the games on a Sunday afternoon, I knew that going to one was never a possibility for me or my third-grade classmates, as the majority of us came from low-income families. As an African American biracial student, I was one of few in the school, as the majority of students were Latinx. I enjoyed my 1st and 2nd grade classes but not my 3rd grade class. After my teacher died of cancer, my majority Latinx class had no long-term substitute and the substitutes we did tend to have taught in Spanish to accommodate the 29 other students. Looking back, I wish my mother had advocated for me to be switched into another class, but she was too busy with what was going on at home.

My third grade was so awful and the year, 2008 was going awful too. My mother divorced my stepfather and we had to move into a 2-bedroom apartment. In late September, on our way home from our after-school program, my mother asked my siblings and I if we wanted to move to Virginia. We all said yes and two weeks later, we left in our car - leaving behind all our precious toys as we headed east. We arrived 5 days later in the middle of the night and when I woke up, we were surrounded by rolling mountains and a deep morning fog.

Front Royal, Virginia was nothing like Denver with rolling mountains instead of Rocky Mountains, less than 10 stop lights and countryside outlook, and yet my family and I began to acclimate ourselves. My school environment in the rural Shenandoah was very different from Denver. Everybody knew everybody. There are generations of teachers in my schools and generations of students. Families stayed in town and rarely left. The community and environment were majority white, but I was able to deal with that due to growing up in an all-white family. It was stable and that was what I needed most to thrive. Yet, the one thing that still lingered in the town and its people was the strongest hate, racism.



I went to a newly renovated Warren County Middle School which used to be the shell of the original Warren County High School. The air permeated with its racist past as Warren County has demographically stayed the same with being a homogeneous white population, with only 10% or less being African and people of color. Prior to 1960, there was no school for African Americans in Warren County and oftentimes, African Americans throughout the Shenandoah would live as boarders in counties miles away to gain an education. The massive resistance in Virginia led to Warren County high school not being integrated until 1960, 6 years after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling.

I had a very hard time in middle school due to constant bullying from white students and a lack of caring teachers. However, I did well academically, and this got me recognition going into high school. My high school had grades 8-12 and school staff got to know me well over the 5 years I attended. I started to love school more due to my extracurricular activities such as band, choir, and academic team. My teachers and administrators grew to love my sister and I and became our support system during a time we needed most. At the beginning of my junior year, my mother lost our home and my sister, and I were homeless and living with friends, all while taking 4 Advanced Placement courses. Despite the difficulties of the time, my education greatly empowered me and helped me realize that I can break my familial cycle of poverty. Our school family became our greatest support system and helped us through graduating high school and getting into college with plenty of scholarships.

However, I always noticed that my sister and I were the only ones of color in AP courses. I noticed that other Black students weren't treated the same and punished for things my sister and I got away with, including physical altercations. My sister and I were able to be distraught and grieve our loss and frustrations, but all other Black students seemed to not get the same treatment. While I am so thankful for the education I have received and the support system that is still with me today, I can't help but feel as though I was given the charity pass within my school system due to my hard work, being biracial, and my "sob story." I feel as though I am the one exception and most of my Black classmates did not gain the same education as my sister and I. Looking back, I feel as though Black students were set up to fail from the start, already being born into inequalities and disadvantages. Preconceptions already made from jump and the expectation that they need to prove they are worthy of such support.

All the Black and brown children that already have a hard life should have one place they can call home: school. My education has helped me break my cycle of poverty as I am a first-generation college graduate and am now doing well for myself and living in a city I love; all dreams I thought were unreachable when I was 15. As a place where children are for a good half of their life, it should be a place that doesn't just provide a quality education, but also actually believes in the talents and gifts of every student regardless of demographic and social background. It should be a place where a child, like my younger self, can hope and dream about their future and provide access to out of school programs and extracurriculars that help



children thrive in all ways and keep them safe. We need school communities and systems that truly care about children's lives and outcomes. This is what I hope and wish for all children in DC. I hope that my work can dismantle their fundamentally racist beliefs and practices, unjust education system and rebuild an equitable, quality, community driven education for every child so that no matter what life has dealt them, every child can reach their full potential.

References: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/remembering-massive-resistance-black-students-who-integrated-a-va-high-school-are-honored-for-their-role-in-history/2019/02/15/3fa46cf6-316a-11e9-8ad3-9a5b113ecd3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/remembering-massive-resistance-black-students-who-integrated-a-va-high-school-are-honored-for-their-role-in-history/2019/02/15/3fa46cf6-316a-11e9-8ad3-9a5b113ecd3c_story.html)