

Marisa Pashkin

Power Autobiography

I grew up in Huntington, New York on Long Island and went to public school throughout my entire school career. While my school was diverse, that was where it ended. Huntington township was split into three distinct areas that the residents referred to as Huntington, Huntington Station, and Huntington Bay. Huntington, where I lived, was made up of mostly middle class “average” residents and families. Huntington Station was majority black and Latinx families and Huntington Bay, being by the water, was where the “rich” or more well-off and mostly white families lived. Primary and elementary schools were plentiful in the town and were separated among these three areas. Those schools then fed into one middle and high school to create the more diverse schools that I remember.

However, despite all three areas of town feeding into one middle and high school and the overall diversity of the school improving, my core classes continued to lack the diversity you would see in the hallways. As many of my core classes were honors or AP courses, I was surrounded by students who looked just like me – white. While today I recognize this for the systemic and educational failure that it was, I did not see anything wrong or even unordinary about this growing up. It was simply the way it was.

I was surrounded by unrecognized privilege growing up. I had two educated and white-collar working parents who specifically chose our home based on the school district. I had both the financial and social resources to try almost any activity I wanted and when it came time for SAT prep, my parents did not hesitate to pay for both a math and language tutor. In fact, any time I struggled with school, my parents worked hard to get me the resources I needed to succeed.

While college opened my eyes to the broader inequities plaguing our society and educational system, it was not until I moved to DC to spend a year volunteering at a medical respite home for men experiencing homelessness. Serving as the patient activities coordinator, I had the unique opportunity to interact with our patients on a level beyond their medical needs. Through conversation at craft hours, baseball games and movie nights, I was given the privilege to hear the men’s’ stories, which often included their experience in the education system. Many of the men that ended up in our respite facility did not have access to the same educational opportunities that I did. In fact, many never graduated high school and college graduates were few and far between. I occasionally had patients show up for activities who were not comfortable reading or writing anything beyond their own name.

Throughout my time at the medical respite facility, where I worked for four years following my service year, I took the opportunity to educate myself on the systemic racism and inequalities plaguing our country. I read as much as I could get my hands on, attended conferences and webinars for DEI, and learned to get comfortable with being uncomfortable as I strived to



confront my own privileges, biases and lack of knowledge. I know now that my all-white classroom was not a random occurrence, but a result of an educational system not set up to provide all students the same opportunities. Although I still feel hopelessly uneducated at many times, I am thrilled to be with PAVE and to start working towards addressing the inequalities in DC's educational system.

