

James Treuthardt

Power Autobiography

Since the time I finished my schooling at Erickson Middle School, I wanted to be a film director. I dreamed of being one of the greats. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of people like Spielberg, or Bong Joon-Ho, or Jordan Peele. I loved telling stories. Stories like *500 Days of Summer* that made me laugh, or *Get Out* that made me grip the edge of my seat, or *The Shoplifters* that made me realize the many ways people can find family. When I got to college, I knew right away I wanted to major in film.

Which is what made it all the more odd, that having just snuck off a film set right before my sophomore year, I was ready to make a phone call that would change my entire college trajectory. When it came down to it, I wasn't sure who I was making stories for anymore. There was a lot of happening in this country, and I had to make a choice and ask myself the question: what's my story? So I'll begin by telling a story that's very important to me. The story of me.

I came from a single-parent household. When I was little, my father, an alcoholic, fled the United States in order to avoid paying child support, which is apparently really easy to do. Since that moment, it was just me, my mother, and my sister trying our best to survive. My mother taught preschool, hardly a huge money maker. So when my father left, our socioeconomic status plummeted and life wasn't simple anymore.

As a boy growing up in a fatherless home, the odds were against me. According to the National Principal's Association Report (NPAR), 71% of high school dropouts come from a fatherless home. My own father didn't even graduate from high school, and him leaving made it even more likely I would

follow in his footsteps. Not having a father made it more likely I would do poorly in school, it made it more likely I would go to prison, and it made it more likely I'd have mental health issues.

Honestly, I don't think I would be where I am today if it hadn't been for my mother's role in my education. As a preschool teacher, my mother always valued my education. I remember late-nights where she read Harry Potter to me and my sister. I remember her challenging us to races to see who could learn to count to 100 first. I remember her pushing me each and every day to do well in school. I remember her pushing me to apply to college. And I remember not always being appreciative of those things, but without it I worry I might have ended up the same person my father was before me.

But going off to college, my mind wasn't really on education. I had worked with children throughout high school and middle school, and loved it, but my heart was set on film. That's where Students Expanding Austin Literacy, or SEAL, really played a role. SEAL was an organization that worked with low-income schools to provide reading buddies. I hadn't really thought about my own upbringing before that moment. Not many people associate suburbs with racial or economic segregation, but in my hometown of Allen that was kind of the norm.

All the low-income families, which often fell along racial lines, lived in the same area. This included my family. As a result, I was pushed into Boyd Elementary, the lowest-performing elementary school in the entire district. Throughout my time there, I saw fellow students excel in elementary school, but fall short of that in middle and high school despite their hard work and effort. Their educational foundation simply was not there. I remember in 3rd grade, my teacher gave up teaching us cursive because she did not believe we were capable of learning it. I remember in 6th grade, our teacher yelling at us that we would never amount to anything and that we should just give up. Going there it felt like no one believed in us

and we would always be at the bottom. The teachers at my school had power and chose to use it to make us feel like less than we were. I didn't want a child to feel like that in school ever again.

So back to today, ready for my phone call with my college advisor. As much as I loved directing, as much as I loved movies, I knew there was something more important I needed to do. With that, I changed my degree to Journalism. There's a lot of problems out there that need telling. Sitting around telling my stories is great, and it's important to who I am, but the stories I most want to hear, and the stories most important to tell, are the stories that often aren't told. The stories of the principal working to run their school despite teacher shortages, the stories of the non-profit working to inform parents of the best schools for them, the stories of the grassroots organizers trying to start a parent movement. All these stories need telling. I want to use the power I have to lift up the voices of others. I want to be the one to tell them and the one to fight to make things better for all people in education, so no child ever has to settle for where they came from. Stories are important and they can change the world, so the one thing I want to ask you all is this: What's your story?