

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and spent my formative years in a close knit, all black community. Those early years were spent in the safety of my grandmother's home in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood on the east side of town. I lived there with my mom, two aunts, and my grandmother – who took her role as the matriarch and protector of our family *VERY* seriously. If you've ever been to Cleveland, Ohio then you know it is a very segregated place. Literally. Black people are on one side of town and white folks, for the most part, are on the other side. Growing up I thought this was normal. *Diversity* was not really something I witnessed in my immediate community but it was an experience I watched unfold daily as my grandmother took the long drive to the other side of town for me to attend an all white private Christian school outside of our community. She wanted me to be in a *good* school but knew how conflicting that might be for me as a child. She constantly surrounded me with the love I needed to make me feel secure and proud of my blackness.

When I was five years old, my mother decided to join the Army. She wanted to move us out of Cleveland with the hope of creating a better life for us but my grandmother was not having it. She let my mother know she was not okay with me leaving Cleveland until she knew my mother was settled and on solid footing. It wasn't until I was eight years old that I moved out of my close-knit, all black community in Cleveland to live with mother El Paso, Texas where she was stationed at Fort Bliss. Not only did my address change but so did my last name when my mother married that same year.

Growing up as an Army brat was a unique experience. My parents were commissioned Officers in the Army – so this often meant we lived on a side of the army base in housing with families that were very different from my own. Housing on military bases are often segregated with Officers living in one part of the base and Enlisted soldiers living in other areas. Most of the families living in Officer housing were not black and as you can imagine this was a far cry from the community I was born into in Cleveland. I attended public schools run by the Department of Defense, with educators who were likable but didn't seem to have high expectations of the students they were responsible for educating. It was the first time that I realized, supporting the brilliance of black kids like me wasn't the priority. There was an expectation for black kids like me to stay in line, behave, and to do just enough of what was expected of us. During that time I only had one teacher who seemed to have a real love for teaching, Mr. Dorgan, my teacher for both fifth and sixth grade. He noticed my love for reading and really took an interest in helping me explore how reading could expand my worldview and celebrate my history and culture. I

will never forget that — and he loved Altoids mints! He always had a box of Altoids to share with the class. In 1993 we moved from Ft. Stewart in Tacoma, Washington to Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia. Up until that point we'd lived many places but nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced when my parents decided we would live off base and they purchased their first home in a growing suburban community right outside of Augusta in Columbia County.

I realize now as an adult so much of how I view education comes from my time as a student in Columbia County Public Schools. It shaped me. Whew... it was a tough time. I was too young to understand it then but oh the things that time taught me about race and about how being black impacted the quality of education the system *thought* they could give me but they have never met a black momma like mine. Ethlyn Gibson is not to be played with. When my parents saw the things happening they fought back and they fought back hard. They organized other black parents in our community and made clear demands on what needed to change, what they expected to see happen immediately, and that they would take legal action if necessary. My parents knew what I deserved and they accepted nothing less. Watching my parents fight for the education I deserved is what motivated me to have the same fight! It led me to become an educator and teaching at Lake Shore Middle School in Jacksonville, Florida – under the leadership of one of the most amazing leaders I know, Iranetta Wright – changed my life. What I learned from my students and the time I spent in the classroom continues to be a driving force for me even today.

Now I'm a parent. I am raising two children with my husband in a city that we love with the education system that's evolved but still has constant reminders of the education system my parents fought hard to protect me from. I think a lot about my parents' sacrifice. About how they wanted me to have more than what they had and I feel that way each and every day, not just about my children, but also the other children right here in our city.

A mentor of mine used to ask a question each day, *"and how are the children?"* And every day I *wanted* to respond *"ALL the children are well"* but I could not. Anyone who knows we know I am an optimist. I believe we possess all the tools we need to make sure *"all the children are well"* and even with all the challenges ahead, and the work we desperately need to do, I believe it is possible! But most importantly, I wake up each day even more committed to doing the work and being a part of the solution.