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SOCIAL JUSTICE REFLECTIONS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

This chapter consists of students' reflections about their experiences in the George Mason University (GMU) Counseling and Development Program, which has a core mission of training future multicultural social justice counselors. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences in their graduate studies and to focus on pivotal and poignant moments in their training. Although social justice issues are emphasized and intensely explored from the introductory first class and included in every course in the program, students' awareness and insight related to social justice and multiculturalism most often peaks during two classes, the Multicultural Counseling class and the Counseling and Social Justice class; the latter is the only required social justice course in a graduate counseling or psychology program to our knowledge. Therefore we have asked students to reflect on this pivotal moment in their training, tapping into their experiences in either one of these classes. The student reflections are deeply personal and provide examples of students' life changes, the risks they have taken, and the courage they have had to speak out and act on

social injustices as these injustices relate to their personal and professional development.

I SEE YOU BLACK GIRL—BUT I DARE TO SPEAK AND CHALLENGE

Reston Bell

I was born with two marks against me. My name is Reston Bell and I . . . am . . . a Black . . . woman. This is the foundation upon which this course (Multicultural Counseling) reflection stands. What made me feel safe enough to share? What prompted me to take the next step? What words can be imparted to give people the courage to speak up? These are all very good questions that I will do my best to provide real and occasionally raw responses to. As you read this piece, I ask that you do so with an open mind, knowing that my expressions, sentiment and pain are not yours or mine alone to bear. Reality is . . . the blemishes of racism and racial discord that are perpetuated through our hesitant honesty

and collective silence; these are a shared responsibility. And so, upon these pages I will seek to write truth.

What Prompted Me to Take the Next Step?

Before enrolling in this course, I was forced to ask myself, “Reston, do you really want to take down the protective wall that you have built painful brick by painful brick?” Though uncertain of the answer, I enrolled and seriously doubt that I will ever be the same. For me, it has all been worth the occasional sleepless nights, the irritability, and the hurtful remembrance of difficult events. The greatest challenge of this course, Multicultural Counseling, concerned my struggle to unlearn the defense mechanisms that I was socialized to develop. The challenges associated with unlearning these crippling yet protective mechanisms went/go (it is a process) hand in hand with my fear that I would be unable to do so. This relearning process was especially difficult because despite foolishly trying, I could not figure out how far back these learned responses went. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were not accompanied by the subject of self-hatred, but I learned it. In one of our assignments I wrote, “I cannot say that I remember being taught how to internalize mistreatment and direct the resulting hate inward, all the while never addressing my aggressors. No, my social education was much more subtle than this, and for this fact my relearning has to be that much swifter.” After careful reconsideration, I know this to be untrue.

Finding the Courage to Speak

Like countless others, the messages that I received were far from subtle and knew no limits. When I cut off my relaxed hair and went natural, a 70-year-old African American woman asked, “What, you think you have good hair or something?” The message was disheartening. When I straightened my hair after wearing it in its natural curly state for a year and a professor from one of

my former programs remarked, “You look so professional with your hair like that,” I was hurt, because in my natural state, I know that my professionalism will always be smoke and mirrors to some message. When I shared my educational aspirations with my high school guidance counselor and he stated, “That’s nice, but I think you should be realistic,” I was pissed because he said it and infuriated because parts of me wanted to believe it, message. It is being told “job well done” on a completed assignment, when the product reflects nothing more than a mediocre effort with the implication being, you expect very little from me, or even worse, you are not sincerely concerned with whether or not I am successful in my learning process, message. When my English teacher never called on me, yet labeled me disinterested and unprepared, it conveyed a certain message. When I returned from the 2009 inauguration and found my front yard littered with headlines from the morning’s newspaper, I found a message in that. When some say “you talk like a white girl,” or others note “you are so articulate,” is speaking like a “white girl” a compliment? Am I articulate, or am I articulate for a “black girl”? Another message. A pastor during last year’s revival preached, “It’s not what’s on the resume that I praise Him for. No, I praise Him for everything that happened between those lines.” In this same way, it is not necessarily the intent or the words exchanged, but their message, what lies between the lines that stings, pervades, and paralyzes our progression.

Development and strengthening of openness and patience is underway. Over and over again, one of our readings stressed the difficulty of coming to terms with what it means to be White in our country. As an African American woman, my understanding of what it means to be White generates what I would call envy. I am envious of the fact that Whites have to work so hard to determine what it means to be White and its implications. Minorities do not have this luxury, and it is upsetting. I wish that I could walk into a room and not feel the hush that comes over it. But, like most minorities, I have never had the opportunity to forget who I am and what that

means in the dominant culture. Lest I forget, my skin always tells on me, and the world, like a taunting child, pulls me in for a hug and quietly whispers in my ear, "I see you Black girl." At least this is how I feel, always with the give and take. I climb, but can only climb so high before I am reminded.

Previously, I made efforts to cross ethnic/color lines with the intent to remain until comfortable. However, through taking the Multicultural Counseling course, I realize that the impact of such efforts has always been limited to me. What good is it for a man to reach the top of a mountain and have no one with whom to share the moment? This class revamped my outlook. For many years I fought to climb this mountain all by myself, believing that tolerance was a personal journey. While there is some truth to this fact, in the same way war never really leads to peace; isolation never really leads to widespread acceptance. And so, I along with many of my classmates took the frightful plunge into the abyss that is the harsh yet real reality that accompanies honest racial discourse. Consequently, things I used to notice and "overcome"/internalize are now up for discussion.

For those valiant professors who are planning to facilitate this course, I commend you for taking a step towards teaching tolerance that many in your position will never care to take. I want for you to know that it will not be an easy task, as truth is the hardest lesson to teach, but the easiest to resist. I think it was Dr. Chung's fearlessness when it came to speaking candidly that allowed students to feel as though our classroom was a safe place for honesty, even when their opinions dissented from the group's. Push your students to eat, sleep, and drink multiculturalism. Show your students that it is more than letters on a page or words exchanged between classmates. Teach them that it is wasteful to leave words bouncing around the four walls of your classroom. Teach them that their real work begins when they leave your classroom and come into contact with the world. With my fellow students I share simple words.

Dare to listen; be validated, wrong, hurt, challenged, and honest; but almost most importantly, dare to speak, dare to be heard!

ADDICTION TO WHITE PRIVILEGE

Elizabeth Davis

I am a 27-year-old Caucasian female and I have lived in the same southeastern state all my life. In recent years I became engaged and then married to my husband and relocated from the northern suburbs to the southern rural farm land of Virginia. I grew up going to school with quite a diverse group of peers and now live and work amongst majority Caucasians. However, I do visit my hometown quite often as I am a graduate student completing the last year of my master's degree in school counseling at GMU. Even though I grew up with peers of different cultures and nationalities, I never considered how little concern I had for multicultural issues and how they could have affected my peers until I took the Multicultural Counseling class.

I have to be completely honest and admit that Multicultural Counseling was not a course I was looking forward to taking. I was afraid and embarrassed to begin an open and honest discussion about a topic I was always taught was taboo, race. In my family there are four things you just don't talk about: money, religion, politics, and race. My fear of discussing race was so severe that if asked to identify a person of color in a crowd, I would have rather described that person by the color of the shirt than the color of the skin.

During Multicultural Counseling, I went through a myriad of emotions from fear and anger to guilt, then confusion and finally confidence. Yet, I never experienced these emotions alone. I strongly suggest having allies in the journey to becoming more culturally competent, because otherwise it can be a lonely road. At first I was afraid to speak honestly with my classmates but many of them have become strong allies in my journey. In fact if it were not for the encouragement and kind words

of one of my classmates, I don't think I would be the person I am today.

I believe my turning point came after reading *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life* (Helms, 2008). We were required to write an honest reflection on this reading. At the time I had a friend who was struggling with substance abuse. Experiencing this struggle and reading this book compelled me to write about the correlation between the feeling of superiority that is provided via racism and the high that is provided by narcotics. Like narcotics, racism is the poison that one seeks out to feel content. However, just like one must work to become sober, a Caucasian individual like myself must constantly work to develop a healthy White racial identity. Reading Helms's guide made me discover my addiction to White privilege. It also made me explore the rewards of establishing a healthy White identity in order to combat racism, albeit with some discomfort along the way. Just as a drug addict has to go through withdrawals from narcotics, I had to experience withdrawal from the high superiority gave me. Just as addicts writhe about in pain as they detoxify, I had to get used to the anguish I felt about my own race and other racial groups while on my journey to becoming a more racially competent counselor. One of the hardest parts for me to read aloud was the recollection of previous racist views. As I read my candid reflection aloud to my class, I could feel myself trembling, the hot tears of embarrassment upon my face and what seemed like a lifetime of repressed viewpoints all coming pouring out. After this experience, I felt as though the emotional barriers were lifted, and I was free to further explore myself.

There were a few factors that contributed to my success in this Multicultural Counseling course. First, as I mentioned previously I had support from classmates, our professor, and my family. One tool I believe was useful in helping my classmates and me share was Blackboard. Blackboard provided a cyber-support group, and it allowed us to share honestly without being judged in person. Second, the reading materials and assignments that we were given allowed us to view others' struggles with racism and explore our own struggles.

Through this course I was able to learn that it is not only okay to talk about racial issues, it is absolutely necessary. Completing Multicultural Counseling has helped me to better understand and empathize with clients of color. This course has also empowered me to speak out against racism. This was no easy task, and my journey is far from over.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT:
I THOUGHT THERE WAS
NOTHING MORE TO LEARN

Jan Weng

I graduated with a master's in counseling in 2006. During my academic career, there have been two courses that stand out in providing the culmination of my training in social justice and multiculturalism and impacted me the most: Counseling and Social Justice, and Multicultural Counseling. I suspect there are several other reasons why this is, but the main reason in my mind is the courses' relevancy to my life and my life's work, which is counseling.

I am a 54-year-old, Black male with a birth-defected left arm. I am also an addict who has been in recovery for almost 18 years. Further, I have been a substance abuse counselor for almost 27 years. You may ask, "How can someone have more years as a substance abuse counselor than he has as a recovering person?" It is important to consider this question, as a part of who I am, and from where I came professionally . . . and also to note that my story is not unique. My life experience is key to why these two courses have been so influential in my development as a person and as a counselor. Growing up, I did not like myself much, and as result, I behaved in ways that caused me to feel worse about myself, and in turn, exhibit even worse behavior. I was caught up in a destructive cycle of low self-esteem, addiction, crime, and punishment. In 1975, I was offered treatment instead of prison, and of course I took treatment.

Near the end of my treatment, I was offered a job, as a counselor, in the very same program

I was being treated in. Although I did more administrative work than clinical, at the time, I was among the ranks of a new breed of counselor that was becoming more prevalent, especially in substance abuse treatment: the peer counselor or recovering counselor. This “new” professional became popular, I believe, for two reasons: 1) The labor was cheap, and 2) these recovering addicts had firsthand experience of active addiction and recovery from addiction. So who else could better provide a road map from active addiction to recovery than one who has walked the road himself?

Although I ultimately received training in the therapeutic community model of treatment and in counseling techniques, it was minimal by comparison to what was needed. Most substance abuse counselors were not exposed to the rigors of counseling theory and ethics. If you did not seek formal training on your own, you did not receive it. Hence I struggled persistently with reacting, rather than responding, to clients and their needs. I had no clue about issues such as transference/countertransference, and for the most part I, like many other peer counselors, “flew by the seat of my pants!” In hindsight, I suspect that I harmed some clients out of ignorance, but I find consolation in the belief that I maintained a genuine desire to be helpful to another human being. It always seemed easier for me to care for another than it was to care for me. I learned a lot in those many years of counseling: I developed an understanding of theory and practice that sustained me in what became my career.

Prior to coming to GMU, I was convinced that there was not much more I could learn: I was cocky about my expertise and came to classes with a know-it-all attitude, yet I felt inadequate as a student, and hence I resisted academics even more! When I think of the Multicultural Counseling and Counseling and Social Justice courses I participated in, under Dr. Chung’s facilitation, I think of them as a combined experience, rather than as two separate courses. The Multicultural Counseling course was a safe place to talk: Dr. Chung insisted upon it; she led by example by supporting those who took positive emotional risks and by taking emotional risks herself. I took a risk, expressing what it felt like to be a Black man in

the United States, and further a Black man with a physical handicap.

Through that discussion I was able to process the countertransference I experienced when counseling White middle class families. For years I had struggled with that discomfort, and never once brought it up or discussed it with anyone. I never heard the term “White privilege” prior to the course. Instantly, I understood a major source of my insecurity and inadequacy. In a reaction paper I wrote, I was able to report that the discussions about racism, for the first time in my experience, felt hopeful and genuine in the search for remedy and understanding. Also, it was evident that such discussions were brought to larger forums, that is, I took much of what I learned back to my own workplace and applied it in my own supervision, as well as with those employees I supervise. Reading Helms’s book gave me a clear direction in conceptualizing the various degrees of racism that I encounter in my routine interactions with White people and people of color. It’s still amazing to me how this class helped me process my own “Whiteness” as a Black man, especially in terms of my interaction with other Black people, particularly Black people from low income areas.

Counseling and Social Justice was a continuation of Multicultural Counseling. It began with Dr. Chung’s contract for safety, in the class and in our discussions. Many of the students in this class had been in the previous one as well, so the relationships carried over. The most significant process that I remember about this class involved the character portrayals. Each student was required to portray a character of a different gender, class, race, and ethnic group from their own. Each character had an issue that the students had to discuss and advocate for. Dr. Chung assigned each student a character that was most unlike that student. I was assigned a White, middle class housewife in her 30s with two children. Her husband was abusive but worked hard, made a lot of money, and paid the bills. Throughout the semester, we referred to the various characters and their issues as they pertained to the elements of social justice, such as advocacy, empowerment, etc.

Traditional counseling postulated that the problem was within the client, and that there was

where the work needed to take place, and that society was basically too big to affect in any way. Social justice counseling validates clients' experiences. I learned a concrete way of understanding client-centered therapy and the notion of collaboration. The strength-based approach has also been made clear to me in our discussion of pathologically based treatments, which is the style I "grew up" under: Pointing out what's wrong and "telling" the client how to "fix it."

These are just some of the examples of how these two courses have impacted my view of counseling. I sincerely have had a paradigm shift as a direct result of my coursework at GMU, and specifically the curriculums of Multicultural Counseling and Counseling and Social Justice. These are two very effective processes that address the area of focus most needed at this time: the counselor's process in establishing a therapeutic relationship with his clients, particularly as it relates to that counselor's own issues regarding gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Ultimately we are tasked to serve our clients not by insisting on what we think they need, but by empowering, guiding, and coaching them in the direction they envision for themselves, ultimately.

WHITE DENIAL: I'M NOT WHITE, I'M JEWISH

Katherine Golkow

Reflecting back upon my experience in my Multicultural Counseling class, I am struck by the extreme challenges that class presented for me. The topic that I struggled with the most was coming to terms with White privilege. Though I found much of the material hard to swallow, the thought of joining the ranks of the many counselors who are not trained to be multiculturally competent was far more alarming and prompted me to press on.

Before beginning my Multicultural Counseling class, I had never even heard of the term *White privilege*. In fact, I hardly considered myself White; the running joke in my household was to

check "Other" on race questionnaires and write in "Ashkenazic," which is the Jewish ethnicity of my family. The idea that being Jewish separated me from the rest of the White population was something that had been emphasized for me my whole life; I learned about Jewish people suffering throughout history, that many people today still hold anti-Semitic ideologies, and that even though I had the same skin color as other White people, I was really different than them. I was in "White denial," where I fully embraced the idea that I wasn't "really" White; I was Jewish.

The classroom exercise that really hit home with me was a White privilege questionnaire where we checked off ways in which we had benefited from White privilege; I felt shocked as I checked off each and every item. This realization set off a series of strong emotions within me. After denying my "White-ness" for so long, I felt angry and confused. My anger was deep, and was aimed both outward and inward. I was angry with my family for raising me with blinders on toward my White privilege, I was angry with society for being content to perpetuate White privilege, and I was angry with myself for having lived in blissful ignorance for so long. I became angry with friends, family, and even strangers for being as blind as I had been and continuing to choose to do nothing about it. All this anger sparked confusion. My worldview up until that point had just been proven wrong, and I didn't know what to do next. I had a new viewpoint, a lot of anger, and was left with the question: what now?

At this point, several aspects of my Multicultural Counseling class became key in helping me move forward, specifically, the emphasis put on sharing and processing. The professor encouraged us and challenged us to share our reactions to the class material and created a safe environment for expression. I benefited from being able to process my anger and confusion, just as I benefited from hearing other students do the same.

It is important to note that while the emphasis on sharing and processing was very helpful to me in many ways, it also presented a challenge. It took several weeks for me to be comfortable enough to open up about painful topics and air my

own experiences and biases to the class. However, once I did it, I felt a powerful surge of emotion and empowerment. It was empowering because when you don't discuss your own racism, it owns you, but when you identify it and expose it, then you own it, and that's when you are able to make a positive change for the future. I believe that all Multicultural Counseling classes should include students reflecting on their own biases, however painful and difficult it may be, because without acknowledging that we all have biases and identifying what those biases are, counselors can cause harm to their clients by unknowingly projecting these biases onto them.

The assigned readings for our class also helped me progress beyond my upset emotions. Reading *One Struggle Through Individualism: Toward an Antiracist White Identity* (Croteau, 1999) was incredibly helpful to me. Like Croteau, I identified with a minority group in a collectivist sense without analyzing my role as a White person; I embraced the "we" of being a Jewish woman and hadn't until recently tried to understand what it means to be White. Croteau's insight on his identity as a homosexual man creating a "window" through which to view his identity as a White man was very intriguing to me. His journey helped me realize that being White didn't disqualify me from having an identity as a Jewish woman. In fact, my identity as a Jewish woman could be used as a way to view my identity as a White woman as well. Another reading that helped me move beyond my anger and continue to develop an identity as a White person was the book *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have* (Helms, 2008). This book helped map out a journey to a healthy White identity and made me realize where I was in that journey and where I had to go next.

Learning about White privilege and moving past anger and confusion to acceptance of my identity as a White woman was a life-changing experience. I felt like a blindfold had been removed; suddenly I could see the effects of White privilege not only in my own life, but in society as a whole. It is imperative that all counselors take the time to not only learn about White privilege on an academic level, but process it on a deeper level and as

it relates to their own lives. I believe that only then will they be able to see how their clients benefit from White privilege or suffer under racism. It is my hope that my reflections on my experience in my Multicultural Counseling class will help other students who are struggling to feel like they are not alone, and will provide counselor educators with understanding of how to best help their students.

LIVING IN THE SHOES OF ANOTHER PERSON: SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND ADVOCACY COME ALIVE

Rodolfo E. Marengo

My name is Suzanne Johnson. I am a 16-year-old White female in my last year of high school. Yes I am a senior. Big deal! The truth is that being a senior doesn't mean much to me, except perhaps for the fact that at least when I finish high school, my nightmare will be over. Yes, high school has been a nightmare for me. As a matter of fact, I think that my entire school experience has been a nightmare, a lie. I am tired of showing to others something I am not. I feel disgusted with myself, not for being a lesbian, but because I have kept it to myself all my life. I am tired of living the life of a heterosexual girl. I am tired of pretending I like guys. I wish I could just tell everyone the truth about me without having to worry about their rejection, without having to worry about losing my friends, my lifestyle, and even my parents. Sometimes I wish I would just finish it all for good. Yes, I have thought about ending my life on some occasions. I wonder why I had to be born in a world where my kind is not accepted by others. I wonder why it had to be me.

Ever since I was a child, I always felt I was different from other girls. In those days I didn't know I was a lesbian or what a lesbian was, but I knew enough about how girls were supposed to behave and feel to know that I needed to keep my feelings to myself. For this reason, I have always felt alone, isolated in my own world of who I really am. As I grew up in the safety of my

upper-middle-class family, home never felt safe for me. Both my father and my mother are very conservative, and on occasion I have heard them disapprove of gay and lesbian people when these people appear in the media. My father travels a lot in his job. He is in the military and his job requires him to travel to different bases around the country very often. Being in the military, he has been trained to dislike those like me. My mom, on the other hand, is too busy to care about me. She lives in her own world of friends and shopping, spending the money my father makes. Besides, I think she is dealing with loneliness issues of her own by being married to a military man who is never home. I think that she is having an affair. No, I can't seek guidance from my parents, they would probably disown me if they knew they had a daughter who likes other girls. They would be ashamed of me. My worst fear is that they will someday find out. I can't even imagine what they will do. Would they throw me out of my home? I can't take that risk and cause them that much disappointment.

I have always been alone in my quest to find information about those like me. I am not friends with any lesbians in my school or in my neighborhood. All my friends are heterosexual, or at least act that way. Being the captain of the soccer team has made me very popular among my peers. I guess many would like to be in my shoes and have as many friends as I have, but if only they knew. I even have a boyfriend in my effort to hide and conceal that I am lesbian. He even thinks that I am attracted to him, but I feel disgusted when he gets near me. The only way I can stand being with him is by drinking alcohol when I spend time with him, usually on Friday evenings after the football games.

This kind of life has to stop. I can't go through life always looking at myself through the eyes of others, measuring my soul by the tape of a world that looks in on me. I am tired of lying. Yes, silence is a form of lying. I can't go through life making excuses for those around me who do not accept those like me, or worrying over the reputation of those who decide to stick around me when I do decide to come out. I have the right to be a lesbian

without receiving a cold shoulder and rejection. Until that day when I decide to come out, being a lesbian will continue to be lonely. On many occasions I have had to just sit there, listening to stereotypic comments about lesbians, without the courage to say anything for myself out of fear, just listening to the jokes. It is painful to sit and watch while my friends, classmates, and peers tell lesbian jokes right in front of me.

Imagine that this was your life, that you were this girl you are reading about, and that you had been living this life without any guidance, with fear, without hope. This is what I had to do as an assignment for my Counseling and Social class at GMU. The character you just read about, Suzanne Johnson, is not real. She was a product of my imagination who came to exist due to a class assignment to create a character adaptation. My assignment was to create and assume the character of a 16-year-old high school White female whose life experiences were like those you just read about.

The assignment proved to be more challenging than anyone can imagine, because not only was I being required to open up to different experiences from my own and to accept those who are very different from me, but I was also being forced to understand someone whose worldview I could not even begin to comprehend by trying to see the world from her own perspective, not mine. So the question posed by this assignment was whether I, a Hispanic man who has raised his two teenage children to be heterosexual themselves, would be able to comprehend the worldview of a person so different from me and everything I am familiar with.

No, creating Suzanne Johnson's character was not an easy task, for when I created her, I was 37 years old, a Hispanic married heterosexual male, father of a 16-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl. Before this assignment, I had never read any literature about, nor had I ever had any real friendships with, any members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) population. In addition to my ignorance on the topic, my ethnic culture and military background worked against me for this assignment. I was raised in El Salvador until I was 19, and after moving to the United States

and spending five years in California, I moved to Virginia and joined the U.S. Army, where I served as an enlisted soldier for over nine years. Nevertheless, thanks to the guidance of my professor in the program and to the literature that is available on the topic, Suzanne Johnson came to be. And even though she doesn't exist, she is very real as she exists in those who are like her, and who like her have to cope with people who don't accept them, people who judge them, people like us.

Imagine living in a world where you are not accepted by those around you. Imagine living in constant fear of everyone around you, especially those closest to you: your classmates, your friends, your coworkers, your employer, your parents, your siblings, your spouse, all of the people who are meaningful to you and even those who are not. Imagine living in a constant struggle to be someone you are not, trying not to be who you are, and hiding your true self even from yourself. Imagine the disgust of doing things you despise, and giving up doing things you would love to do. Imagine that one day you decide to confront everyone, and as you reveal the true self you have been hiding from everyone for all of your life, you find yourself not only alone and rejected, but also becoming a target for judgment, hate, violence, social isolation, and social injustice. Would you be strong enough to remain truthful to yourself, or would you give in to social pressures? For me, this assignment was the first time I was forced to ask myself these questions.

The GMU program infused multiculturalism and social justice in all the courses. I not only received training in counseling techniques, but in addition, I got to explore how social justice and multiculturalism played a role and influenced the topics covered and discussed in the classroom and in our class assignments. On a personal level, what this meant for me as a Hispanic was that as I learned new subjects in the classroom, it was within a context where my classmates and I became aware of how our different cultures and individual ethnic identities played a role and were affected by the topics we were learning. In other words, not only did we learn the topics required by the counseling program, but in addition, we also

learned how multiculturalism and social justice affect not only our clients, but also our classmates and ourselves. Nowhere did this become truer than in the Counseling and Social Justice and Multicultural Counseling classes.

I am a Hispanic heterosexual male with a worldview typical of Latinos. Machismo is in my veins, and as a result, so is prejudice against LGBT people. At age 37, after having spent the first 19 years of my life in my native country, I was as homophobic as I could be. The interesting thing is that I was not aware of my homophobia. As a counseling student, I have always tried to understand and accept those around me, and before being confronted with my biases by the Counseling and Social Justice class and by the other classes taught in our program with a multicultural focus, I was sure that I had no problem accepting LGBT people. Thankfully, one thing that the GMU counseling program helped me to realize was that acceptance and tolerance are not enough when working with LGBT clients. If we are ever to become effective counselors with them, we not only have to explore our own biases and prejudice against them, but also, we must understand their worldview. This last item is where I've had the most difficulty while in the program. The only reason I have been able to become aware of my ignorance when dealing with LGBT people and with any other population from a culture different from my own has been because of the assignments in my graduate program, the readings required by the program, and most important, the guidance from professors who have made it a point to deliver their material with social justice and multiculturalism in mind.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of training counselors to become multiculturally competent, and to understand the social injustice issues their clients have to face daily everywhere—at work, at home, on the streets, when relaxing while watching television, when going out for dinner to a restaurant, etc. The counseling profession owes it to clients to stop ignoring the issues that affect those very mental health issues we are trying to help our clients to resolve. These days, no longer can we call ourselves professional counselors and

psychologists if we choose to live in denial to social justice issues that affect our clients. These days the majority no longer has absolute power over the minorities, because the counseling profession is full of minority people who will no longer let issues such as White privilege or discrimination due to gender, class, ethnicity, color of skin, or sexual preference go unchallenged. It is time for the profession to be accountable and to lead the mental health profession out of ignorance and social correctness. We owe it to our clients, and most important of all, we owe to ourselves and to those we love, to push for mental health advocacy and awareness. No longer can we be keepers and enforcers of the status quo and call ourselves helpers in the profession. Our ignorance hurts us, it hurts our clients, and it hurts the mental health profession.

Programs like the one offered at George Mason University are gold to the mental health profession. The leadership this program has shown by freeing us counselors from the chains of social correctness and denial are going to create change in our profession, I have no doubt. This is because, just like me, there are many of my classmates who feel like I do, and who have been moved and motivated by our professors to be more than what social injustice allows us to be with our clients. We have been challenged and we are reacting by becoming carriers of change in the profession, change that will benefit our clients, not only those who follow society's expectations, but all of our clients, including those that society tries to ignore.

THE COURAGE TO UNEARTH WHAT I HAVE BURIED

Candace Fleming

As an African American woman, I was a little apprehensive about taking our Multicultural Counseling class. I was very reluctant to open up and share my experiences with racism with the class. I did not want painful memories and experiences that I have long since buried to resurface

again. I did not want to feel vulnerable and most importantly I did not want to take down the walls that I have spent so much of my life building in order to protect myself from the pain and reality of racism. Ironically, what I discovered was that it was more painful for me to remain silent. I began to share my experiences with my classmates to prevent myself from internalizing them. It was my form of self care. I thought of my ancestors and all the obstacles they had overcome. To remain silent to some extent would be to deny their accomplishments and legacy. I also spoke up for my children. I am raising them to be proud of who they are. I could not look them in the eye if I remained silent. So I began to share. The opinions of others in my class were not my concern. My main concern was not succumbing to the evils of racism and not allowing it to penetrate and crush my spirit.

During the course of the semester, I became more comfortable sharing my experiences with racism with the class. In some ways it was very therapeutic for me. Some of the readings for this class validated my experiences. However, there was still something inside, warning me not to go any farther. It was not the pain and emotions that I feared, but the weakening of my coping skills and defense mechanisms that I developed over the years to help me function and cope with racism on a daily basis. I was afraid that if I truly allowed myself to explore and feel the reality and pain of racism, I would crumble and lose the ability to function and survive. This was my true fear. I could not afford to let this happen because I have children to raise and I have to remain strong and mentally tough in order to raise them to be strong, well-adjusted individuals.

This class had a significant impact on me. It was a very emotional experience. In the beginning I experienced a lot of anger and bitterness. I felt frustrated, vulnerable, defeated, and hopeless. Then, towards the end of the semester I began to feel inspired, validated, and a bit hopeful.

The most profound moment for me came at the beginning of the semester when Dr. Chung showed us a list of names. I did not recognize the names on the first list; however, I did recognize

some of the names on the second list. The lists contained the names of individuals who had been reported missing. The first list was composed of missing minority individuals. At that moment, I realized that if my children were missing they would be on the first list, the list of names that no one has heard of or recognized. The ugliness and cruelty of racism became so apparent at that moment. Because of my children's brown skin, very little media attention would be given if they were missing. It was devastating to realize that the people I love and adore the most are not valued at all in this society.

I cried after that class. The thought still lingers in the back of my mind. When I shared this with the class, Dr. Chung replied by saying, then we (the people in this class) will help you look for your children. I believe that most of my classmates would help me if such a terrible thing were to happen, but what an awful thought.

There were times during the semester I felt I was regressing instead of progressing. I felt myself growing angry, bitter, resentful, and suspicious. After hearing some of my classmates describe the racist comments and beliefs of their parents and other relatives, I became discouraged and felt hopeless. Most of my classmates were younger than I, and to hear some of the thoughts and beliefs that were expressed by their families was painful and depressing. As a result, I became somewhat suspicious of some of my White friends and their families. I could not help but wonder what they say when I am not around. Do they have similar thoughts or feelings about me and my family?

Sharing my experiences with the class was difficult at times. I sometimes felt like an animal at the zoo. People like to visit the zoo so they can see and observe the animals, knowing that it is not a good environment for them to be in. They know it is not in the best interest of the animal to live in the zoo, but still they look and stare, then walk by. The animal is kept there, on display for the benefit or entertainment of others. I felt some of my classmates did the same thing with me. They were interested in getting a glimpse of what it is like for a minority to live in a racist society, but they were just walking by.

I have always been aware of racism and discrimination. It has just been part of my life experience. However, this class has forced me to really examine the impact and effects of racism, and accept that it is real. I can no longer just think, assume, or suspect that I have experienced it; I now know I have. For example, when I experience racism I sometimes try to convince myself that racism is not the reason the person in the store ignored me or was rude to me. Sometimes, I may justify an incident by telling myself that the individual was just having a bad day, or that is how the individual interacts with everyone, all the while knowing what was really happening. This class has taught me that my gut is usually right.

In some ways living in such a racist society is insanity. Being despised and hated because of your race is absurd. Yet, most minorities manage to persevere and are quite successful at coping with the insanity.

The challenge ahead of me is remaining strong and not allowing myself to be discouraged by others. Racism is painful and unfortunately it is a part of my life. I have to continue to work hard and not let it hinder or deter me from attaining my goals and dreams. I have to make sure that I do not let it ever get the best of me, or my children.

My heart is heavy right now as I write this. Racism and discrimination are tremendous burdens. However, I take comfort in knowing that I am strong and I am not afraid to stand up for myself or my family. I know I will be a great advocate for others who may need my help one day and this is what will keep me going. I will continue to move forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I encourage students taking a Multicultural Counseling course to be open to the experience. I encourage them to share their experiences no matter how sad or unpleasant they may be. There is always something to be learned from others' experiences. You never know how your story could impact and help someone else. There is also something very therapeutic and freeing about sharing.

There is nothing more powerful than witnessing the growth that someone achieves after sharing a painful story or experience that they kept hidden because they were ashamed or embarrassed. We have to share these experiences. Keeping them buried or hidden is one way racism is able to continue to fester in our society.

It may be difficult at times to listen to others share their experiences, but keep an open mind and try not to let it affect you personally. Let your classmates know that it is okay to discuss discrimination and racism. Participate and try to work through it. As my professor would often say, “Trust the process.”

We are all affected by racism, some more directly than others, but it impacts us all. In order to be truly competent and effective counselors we must examine how we have been influenced by certain messages in society. We have to go there. Actively participating in a Multicultural Counseling class can help us explore and confront our biases, thus enabling us to better serve our future clients.

THE JOURNEY FROM UNAWARENESS TO SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE

Brad J. Pabian

I am a 31-year-old Caucasian male and I grew up in Long Island, New York in a mostly White, upper-middle-class neighborhood. I attended primary school with little to no contact with people from other races and cultures. I never really socialized with friends outside of my culture and race, nor did I have any desire to have friends from diverse backgrounds. All of my parents’ friends were White; all of their friends’ friends were White, and all of my friends were White. Basically, I had a very narrow worldview. The thing about having a narrow or ignorant worldview is that you lack knowledge of and are unaware that you even have a narrow worldview until something happens to change that view. Being aware of our own worldviews and those of clients is what the

GMU Counseling Program and the course on Counseling and Social Justice are all about.

I attended an almost all White liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania. In fact, only when I studied abroad during my last year of college did I really begin to open my eyes to the world around. It was in Spain that I first realized and experienced what it was like to be an outsider, someone from another race and culture, someone who was different. I was “the minority” in Spain. I was an American in a foreign land and received lots of stares and even dirty looks. I remember thinking to myself, “Why are you staring at me? I don’t deserve this. I’m not so different than you are.” It was then that I began to realize, on a small scale, just how narrow my worldview had been for the first 20 years of my life and how prevalent oppressive forces and prejudices are in the world.

Taking Counseling and Social Justice really solidified for me how important it is for counselors to be aware of social justice issues and prejudices and to be advocates for clients. I never really thought of my role as a counselor as being one who pleads for the cause of another person until I came to GMU. I used to think my job was to help our clients mentally and emotionally, and that if social injustices were involved in their problems, then there was a limited amount I could do and basically clients would have to deal with it on their own terms. What GMU’s mission statement describes and infuses into classes is that if social justices are not taken into account when doing counseling with clients, a whole piece is missing from the relationship and really limits our capacities to help them.

One assignment for our Counseling and Social Justice class was a character adaptation. The assignment entailed “becoming” our characters. The purpose was to get into the minds of people who have been oppressed. For my project I did extensive research on human trafficking. My character was a 24-year-old female from Indonesia who was trafficked to the United States. She was promised good pay and a place to stay working as a maid, but in the end, it was just a ruse to exploit someone who was underemployed in Indonesia.

I didn’t really begin to “become” my character until I had gathered all of the data and started

writing as if I were Muka, the trafficking victim. Muka's dream opportunity to work in the U.S. ended up being a complete farce. I didn't know what I would have done if I had been in her place. I began to imagine how exciting it must have been for someone from another country to come into the U.S. and find opportunity and freedom, and how depressing it must have been later to find herself exploited and manipulated. At this point, I began to remember my own excitement at the opportunity to live and attend school in another country and the prejudices I endured in Spain. I know that my experience in Spain was small compared to the horrors of being trafficked and deceived, but with my narrow worldview, it was all the personal experience that I had to utilize to try to "become" my character.

As I write this paper, I am aware of the angry and frustrated feelings inside me that probably are similar to those felt by a lot of people now in the U.S. who have been enslaved by human traffickers, and I believe this was the purpose of the assignment. I learned that, on some level, I needed to be aware of my own worldviews in order to help clients with their own personal worldviews and social justice issues. In my case, I needed to develop this ability better. I understand now that it is a part of our jobs to advocate for clients who have been oppressed. The Counseling and Social Justice class really mobilized in me a passion, a drive, to become more active in preserving the rights of clients, and to incorporate social justice and advocacy into my counseling practice. The class helped define a holistic approach to counseling that treats the entire client and enables us to empower clients to eventually advocate for themselves.

GMU'S counseling program has instilled in me the drive to affect systems. I attended another master's program before GMU, and it was good, but it did not mobilize me to become an advocate, or empower me to make an effort to change the oppressive forces of the dominant culture here in the U.S. The program really empowered us as counselors to be active participants, not just bystanders in making change. In addition, they taught us to have awareness that our worldview is not the only one and that "becoming" our clients

will make our abilities to bring about change even more powerful and enduring. The program made me feel like I could make a difference, but that it was up to me as to how small or how large I wanted to make it.

I AM AN ADVOCACY ADDICT

Hollie M. Jones

When I decided to become a school counselor, I never considered the idea of self-reflecting on my own personal biases and how that would completely change my life. I grew up in a small town in Southern Virginia where everyone was either Black or White and things were kept very simple. I moved to Northern Virginia in 2006 where I began my own life as a 22-year-old female. I submerged myself in the diversity of the new area and enjoyed meeting people who were nothing at all like myself. Multicultural Counseling was a class that changed my entire life. I began my graduate program viewing the world with blinders on, and after reflecting on myself as a White female during the Multicultural Counseling course, I realized that I had been terribly blind.

Before the class, I had learned about process from my group counseling class, and I had learned that in order to be successful in group counseling, one had to trust the process of counseling. That never registered with me until I entered the Multicultural Counseling class. I remember sitting in my kitchen reading *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have* (Helms, 2008) which had been assigned in the class. I cried and allowed myself to fill up with anger, guilt, embarrassment, and shame. All I could see during the reading was my father, my grandparents, my mother, and all of those who played a role in my life growing up. I had been raised in a home that viewed the world through a very racist lens.

My sister had always dated African American men, and being the older of the two, I always felt it to be my job to help her hide this from our father. Every time the issue was brought up for his approval, it was quickly shot down with an

argument filled with disgrace and shame towards my sister. How could she possibly date a Black guy and go against her family's beliefs? I used this, along with support from my classmates and Dr. Chung, to find the courage to speak out to my father about the issue of racism in our family. I became obsessed with educating him on social justice issues and would continuously call to talk to my mother or invite them up to attend a cultural experience I was attending in Northern Virginia. At first, they didn't hear me and were shocked that this was something I was "learning" at graduate school. My grandparents were also very appalled that this was my own developed view on social interaction. I was beginning to form my own values and beliefs, and for my family, it was a bit disappointing to see that my culture was developing into something very different from their own.

For the first time in my life, I realized that I was White. I understood that I was privileged in a way that others would never experience due to being persons of color. I too, had a color, and along with the color, White, came privilege. I realized how others of color viewed me as a blonde, White female and reflected on how I was then going to use this identity to connect to others. White privilege and race are not discussed because it makes people uncomfortable and defensive. My family spent some time being very uncomfortable, but soon realized that I was addicted to advocating and they had no other choice but to hear me.

Fighting through the guilt and shame, and then finding the courage to confront my family, affirmed for me that change happens over time and that even if I am only planting seeds with them now, over time they will listen. I had started the program in a committed five-year relationship, and after taking the Multicultural Counseling class, I realized that as a White female who had developed such passion for social justice work, I also needed a partner in life who supported my views. My relationship ended six months after taking the course due to the differences in values and beliefs we had about life. I felt almost renewed and ready to begin my journey the way I envisioned it to be. I had nothing holding me back and had developed a strong support system of family and colleagues

who were ready to listen and support my desire for advocating.

We choose not to see the ugly, unjust issues in life when we are living in the skins of White privileged beings. One of our privileges is that we don't have to look; we don't have to live it. Past generations of those who held White privilege often abused the power they had and continued to feed into discrimination. I've learned that because I am a White female, people listen to me and will eventually hear me when I passionately advocate for students and those of color in any social injustices that may arise. I have a voice and the ability to speak up. My entire purpose in life changed after taking this Multicultural Counseling class. I processed feelings of guilt, shame, selfishness, courage, anger, frustration, and determination. My family has taught me a lot. I have learned that it's tough to talk about the ugly that's hidden under the rug so that the public doesn't know you're quietly racist, but it will bring a new realization to family members, and an overall sense of respect will develop.

I am a 5'0", blonde, White, privileged female and I have voice that I have chosen to use to speak out against social injustices. I would hope that those who read this reflection can relate and be willing to admit to their own views or biases and know that it's ok to remove your blinders and really take a look at your own color. The question next is, what are you going to do now that you can finally see?

I would suggest processing on your own to begin. Take that time out to cry, weep, and feel ashamed—ashamed that you weren't able to see until now. Admit to yourself that any biases you may have or that your family may have are ok. Give yourself permission to speak, because we may only be able to become who we allow ourselves to be. If we choose to look away and not speak out when discrimination occurs, then no matter what our values, we then still become the oppressor. Find courage through your classmates, your family, and professors. Living with White privilege is something many will never understand, but with this dispensation we can educate others about what it truly means to be living in our

world as a White person of privilege. People who feel safe will be willing to disclose more. Connect to your colleagues, trust in them, and rely on them to help support you through this process. This is the process you must trust in order to successfully develop a true sense of multicultural awareness.

Students of color should also know that being angry and filled with hate towards the White person is also ok. Give yourself permission to be angry. Your challenge will be moving out of anger and into trust towards your fellow White colleagues and peers. I would suggest being as open as you are able to allow yourself to be. Our world has chosen to continue unjust actions that just look different than they may have years ago. Oppression occurs every day in every occupation, school, and life experience. We can all play a role in highlighting these actions and educating others on how a just system is something we all need to be advocating for.

It begins with discussion, communicating, and talking about the pain we all have that racial differences have created. There is a lot of hurt in the world caused by discrimination and transgenerational trauma for all cultures. For those living in a White privileged world like I am, we can all address this hurt if we simply find the courage to admit to what we've chosen not to see until now. Once you've found that courage to admit to these prejudices and then speak out to those in your life, you will begin to feel empowered, strong, and ready to speak out about issues you never even thought would be part of your life.

EMBRACING MY CULTURAL
HERITAGE AND BEING A SOCIAL
JUSTICE AGENT: A POSITIVE BUT LESS
PLEASANT JOURNEY

Diana P. Ortiz

My name is Diana (*De-a-nna*) and I am Latina; I am part of the largest minority group in the United States. I am also a doctoral student in the

counselor education program at GMU, where I also completed my master's degree.

Through the past years, I have taken the task of being thoughtful and have translated thoughts and good intentions into actions. It did not happen instantaneously, and the master's and doctoral programs at GMU had a lot to do with my growth; every class and each of the projects in it have provided a new opportunity to reaffirm some of my beliefs, challenge myself, and give me a new chance to grow. Through the next few pages, I will describe some critical moments of what has been one of the most positive experiences in my life. Warning: I said positive, but not *pleasant*!

I choose to be genuine in my reflections, as I share my journey with you, the reader. This expedition has been full of ups and downs, mysteries and revelations, pain and healing, tears and laughs. The passion for the work I do as a mental health professional and my advocacy work for the underserved population has helped me remain clear on my purpose to continue in this never-ending journey.

A Cultural Shock

I was born and raised in Colombia, and a few years ago I embarked in this multicultural and social justice journey. Six years ago, I landed in New York City after being recruited by a social service agency. For a new professional, the option was attractive; the agency offered me housing, transportation, and a decent salary (compared to the Colombian standards, not the U.S.). In exchange, the agency had a fully trained bilingual professional for cheap labor. Of course, I did not realize the last part at first! Nonetheless, this experience could very well have been the beginning of a long process that clearly enhanced my awareness and interest in becoming an advocate and an agent of change.

At that point, I was changing without knowing it; externally, I was being bombarded by attitudes, messages, ads, and tons of information that did not make sense to me. It didn't take too much to realize I was not feeling comfortable in my skin. I could not understand why I was *classified* as a minority. Once I landed in this country, I was no

longer a *mestiza*, part of a big majority, with privileges and commodities. I was automatically a *Latina*, a woman of color, a minority. That was a tremendous shock, and my life is divided into before and after this experience. I thought I knew what racism was. I thought I was competent working with different ethnicities in my country, so I thought I could translate those experiences into my work in the U.S. I thought I was a social justice advocate because I worked with those underserved. Clearly, I did not know much about the tough realities in the U.S.

Let me be clear, in my country we have had many struggles; however, I would lie if I said I understood then—before I came to this country—what I understand now. Experiencing in my own skin what it means to be a minority, a person of color, provided me the opportunity to look internally and make decisions as to where I wanted to stand in this world. The first two years in the U.S. were very difficult; I was uncomfortable having to select the Latina/Hispanic checkbox. I was mortified with the idea of being associated with a group of people who seemed so distant from my culture, from who I was. At least, that's what I thought. It took some tough experiences to open my eyes and finally put words to the strong feelings that kept coming back. It has been a long process.

I did not like being associated with the sexy Latina stereotype (exotic, strong accent, great curves). I am proud of the beauty of our women, but as Latinas, we have much more to offer and be recognized for. We are worthy because of who we are, and not only for the curves we carry, the size of our bras, or the way we move our hips on the dance floor. I was not happy with the idea of people judging me for the way I look or for the accent I have. So, although I was not part of the problem, I could be part of the solution. I wanted to be proactive and change what was not helping me as a woman of color and help others in similar situations. At that point in my life, I could choose to live the struggles and try to adjust to them, or be part of the change. I was inclined to combat the fear and be active in challenging the status quo of what needed to be different. I needed more tools, though.

A Turning Point: Going To Grad School

After a year of being a foreigner, an immigrant working in this country, I felt like I only had a hammer and a screwdriver in my toolbox, and I was missing the rest of my tools. Although I felt inspired by each of the families I worked with, I also felt sad and confused. I told my supervisor I was applying to grad school, and I wanted to have a letter of recommendation from him; he looked at me and smiled. Then, he proceeded to explain how expensive and difficult my goal was. He said to me, “I know you are bright, but you are poor. Besides, you are a terrible writer. . . . Are you sure about this? Don't you have to go to Colombia anyway?” It has been more than five years since that conversation, and I still carry the stigma that I am not a good writer. It doesn't hurt anymore, but it is a constant reminder of my long path to where I am now.

Before coming to the program at GMU, I was very naïve about my racial and ethnic identity. I knew little about the subtle, and not so subtle, messages in my supervisor's words. I did not feel good that day, but I am glad that a stronger force kept me going. The constant racial microaggressions we experience every day, those *little* moments make us doubt whether we are overreacting, misinterpreting, or misunderstanding part of the message. Those moments are hard to swallow and ignore; they are so subtle and emotionally draining at the same time.

Embracing myself. At the time I started the first semester of my master's program, I was trying very hard to hide my accent. I tried to *blend*, to talk fast, and put a lot of emphasis on the way I looked and the image I wanted to show. My professors saw what I could not see at that time. They challenged me. They helped me process some of the raw feelings I still had. I finally was able to connect what I thought with what I felt. The program at GMU lives and breathes its five core components: multiculturalism, social justice, international reach, leadership, and advocacy. No matter how difficult the classes were,

I finally felt at *home*. It felt safe to be vulnerable and learn with all my senses.

Graduate school changed me not only professionally, but personally. I experienced a profound change; I wish all of us could have that privilege. I confronted my biases and prejudice. I cried and saw myself in the mirror differently; I learned and forgot. I thrived and became a better version of myself. I was aware of new realities, so I could sharpen my skills and open my mind and my soul to new knowledge. A commitment to change and take action is what ultimately makes me a different person today. I remember being seated in the multicultural and social justice classes in the master's program feeling happy to finally understand concepts such as *transgenerational trauma* and *internalized racism*. I felt more confident with my new skills and knowledge. By seeing myself in a better place, I could honestly and genuinely help others who had embarked on such a journey.

My acculturation process would have never been the same if I had not had the space and opportunity to reflect back, read, validate my experiences, and find new meanings for my emotions. Through those classes, I was able to make a conscious decision about taking an active role to transform today's reality for a more just and fair world. I was challenged by the readings, by the class discussions, by the reflections papers, and by projects I had to develop. With so many valuable hands-on experiences, it seems almost impossible not to learn!

In my Counseling and Social Justice class I learned about how numbers translate into issues, and issues into opportunities to act. I learned that no matter how good my intentions are, if I don't do something about them, nothing will change. I learned that change is active, it happens everyday, and I needed to have the guts to live a life worth living. I challenged my classmates, and my classmates taught me to be tough without losing my vulnerable side. I learned so much that I had more questions than answers. I knew I needed to learn more.

I decided to pursue a doctoral degree because I wanted to support and facilitate this process for

other counselors in training. I have a mission for life to educate others in what human suffering looks like. I have a purpose in life to inspire future counselors and educators to challenge themselves. I want to cross borders and show young boys and girls that no matter what their skin color looks like, how tall or short they are, how *thick* their accents are, they can and should have the same opportunities as the majority. It is my promise to you and to me.

A New Self: Transformation Through Activism and Social Change

As a result of my graduate training, I embrace my cultural heritage and continue to learn about my community, my values, and my beliefs. I think of myself as a woman of color, a strong Latina, an immigrant, a daughter, a wife, a sister, a friend, a counselor, a neighbor, a leader, a voice, and a role model for other young Latinas who are straddling two worlds. I believe everyone should have the same access to opportunities. I envision a time in which I will not be the only Latina in a doctoral class or at a leadership meeting at a county office. I don't want to be the *exception to the rule*. I envision a time where I don't have to prove what I know once people identify my accent.

I decided to pursue a doctoral degree so I could have more sophisticated tools to combat injustice and transform archaic and unbalanced systems. Research helps me demonstrate what we want to change and how to do so. Leadership roles give me the opportunity to be effective and influence change. My day is full of different tasks and things to do, and I am happy to be exhausted at the end of the day. I don't want to miss an opportunity to *be* the change, to be where I need to be for my community and future generations.

One of the best things I have learned in my education is that I choose to be where I am, and with my choices I feel responsible for the privilege that comes with opportunities. I am thankful I am not the only one in this fight, and I surround

myself with strong peers, and my support network is a safe place where I can recharge my energy to keep going. I have learned fear and inspiration can coexist at times. I have been fearful to continue seeing the injustice around me, and the fear translates into passion and energy to fight harder. I am no longer insulted by being classified as Latina; I am humble, honored, and willing to embrace my new identity in order to speak out for my fellow women and men of color whose voices are constantly unheard. I keep having experiences that are not pleasant, but they certainly are positive. They become reasons to continue thriving.

I dare you to dream of a better world. I dare you to embrace your cause and do something about it.

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