

Reckoning With Racism in Nursing

Alyssa Harris Transcript

Duration: 11:01

We're addressing

racism in nursing

So it was a little tiny

Southern Baptist College.

The program was really hard.

I was kind of I didn't

necessarily fit in with the clique

right, so I didn't have a lot of

I was new to college,

didn't have

I didn't really know

a lot of the other

African American students,

and we didn't really bond in the program.

I think

I think I had this determination

that I wasn't going to fail.

I wasn't the best student,

but I wasn't going to fail

and I wasn't going to allow them

to fail me out.

My experience growing up

had been always

the only black student in this,

the only black student.

So I had tons of white friends

and tons of whatever,

just because that's what I was used to.

So when I went to college

and it was largely white, I didn't

it was fine with me

because I didn't really

it was all I ever knew.

If you're the only in any institution

you carry the weight

in that

people, it's always the extra scrutiny

and the belief that you have to do it

well because you're blazing the path

for anybody else that might come along.

So if you don't do the job well or not,

a team player or whatever,

you're representing for everybody.

And so you want to do it

well because then

the next person

may not have the opportunity

to or they may be judged

by what you've done,

good or bad.

But, you know, and so you don't

I feel like

I don't want to do things badly

because they would judge

the next person by me.

And so that would make

that makes it really hard

to be you.

But it's just what you do.

You know, I'm sure the people behind me

will be judged by what I did

because they'll be like,

they're comparing you.

If you're the only then you get compared

to who was before

you and who's coming after you,

even though you're

different person and,

what you try to do

is differentiate yourself from

those people.

But you do have the weight

of this responsibility

of not being able to

be yourself.

That definitely is from my father,

who was military.

He was an enlisted military,

and he struggled all his life

because he was enlisted.

And that attitude of

you're not going to put me

out of the military.

You're not going to

whatever is always been

kind of what has grounded us.

And so he's always taught

there's three of three girls

so the five of us total

[he] has always said,

you finish what you need to do.

And so with that attitude, you know,

they you know,

they work really hard

to make sure that we go to college.

I was they

my parents didn't go to college.

So I was the first one to go to college.

And I was like, OK, I can't fail.

And then I had my mother going,

'you can't fail because you're is not coming home'

in my ear.

And him saying to us, you know, that's

this is what we do.

We you have to figure it out.

You have to it's hard.

But if you work hard,

you can achieve anything

and you can progress.

And that's the attitude I've always had.

I think they probably got it

from their families,

you know,

being African American and from the South

it was really hard.

My mother

I do know my mother's saying, too.

You know,

she was one of six and the second oldest.

And when she was graduating high school,

her father said to him

they couldn't

pay for her to go to school.

So you join the military,

you get married.

So she got married to my father.

My father actually family was

a little bit better off in Florida.

And he actually went to

the University of Florida

on a football scholarship

and then got injured.

His first semester and they couldn't pay.

So he had to drop out.

And his father said, well,

you can't come home here

without something.

So he joined the military.

So the two of them together have had this

kind of us

against the world kind of thing.

And so we need to keep pushing.

And so I think they instilled

that into the three of us.

I saw

this is

elderly lady kind of hanging out the bed

in the hospital room.

And I went to her and said,

oh, where you going?

She must've been .

I was like .

She's like .

And she said to me,

Oh, don't hurt me, don't hurt me.

And I was

and I said, Oh,

I'm not going to hurt you.

Let me just help you back.

And she said, You know,

my mother,

grandmother

used to have slaves in the house

and or something like that.

And, you know,

we always took good care of them

and we always and I thought,

Oh, no, you know, and I was flabbergasted

at a year old thinking,

Oh my God, this is,

this is horrible, horrendous.

She thinks somebody is going to hurt her.

That is black and

and it was just a weird experience

as a , year old,

to kind of think about.

I worked for a little

while in a nursing home

when I first graduated and I had

I was the only

there were a lot of LPNs and RNs,

but I was

the only African American nurse.

And they really treated me badly

because I was the only African.

I was like at the time.

So and I was

this young African American nurse

with a degree. And the charge

nurse was an LPN and she was white and

she really did make my life hell

that year.

I should thank her though,

because it forced me to look for a job

and, and, and I went into postpartum

maternity leave.

So I'm quite

thankful for her for making my life hell.

But it really was because

of the color of my skin.

If it was a day off

and they needed somebody

to take charge of the floor

to do that,

I never was allowed to do that.

I on top of that, so left lifting,

tugging and all that other stuff,

which is fine. I don't mind nursing care.

I was always given never pass meds,

always given the treatments

and the heaviest things to do

where they always took a coffee break

and I could never get anybody to help me.

And so I just

I used to sit

on the side of the bed and cry

because I was like, I hate this job.

But yeah, I used to make me really sad.

I didn't want to go to work.

And it was hard because I knew

it was just because I was

black and I had a better degree,

but that wasn't my fault.

She couldn't go to, you know,

it was my fault.

I just did what I was supposed to do.

And so

I never would challenge her

because I was younger than she was.

They would say, Well,

you know, she's in charge.

You just need to do what she needs,

she wants you to do.

And so after a while, I was like,

I can't do this anymore.

I need to look for a new job.

So I did and I did get to come back.

I worked for a semester at Middlesex

Community College,

and I took a group of students

to that nursing home,

and they assigned me to that floor

with the students.

And she was still sitting there

and she said, Oh, I recognize you.

And I'm thinking, my,

oh, yeah, I recognize you too.

And she said, Aren't you a

she said, Elisa Harris?

I said, Yes, that would be Dr. Harris.

Thank you.

And she just looked at me

and I went on about my business.

So that was good. That was pay back.

That was petty, but it was good

you do have the weight

of this responsibility

of not being able to

be yourself.

So I'm always careful

and always on my P's and Q's

about what I do,

and I'm always thoughtful about that.

There is a good side of that in that

if you're doing the job

well in there, liking what you're doing

and you're

following the rules and playing

by whatever standards they have,

then you can progress.

But if you're not doing the job

well or

you don't live up to their standards,

then you get extra scrutiny.

And so people start to like pick

you apart or,

or watch you a little bit more.

And it's just very

it's very tiring.

Maybe and, you know, years,

it may be different, but right now

it is what it is.

And so you either learn to adjust

and continue to do what you do or you

you don't,

and you look for something else.

When I was getting ready

to submit my tenure packet,

I had

an experience where my dean said to me,

We really want you to make tenure.

And if you don't make tenure,

it'll be hell to pay on this campus.

And I was really like,

I was like, I want, you know, tenure

anyways.

I was

already losing

like a year's worth of sleep

anyways for the process

and for me, that was so striking,

which, you know,

because that was a lot of pressure.

And I know there's not that

many faculty of color at Boston College

and so I was, I was like, Wow,

they really are.

I mean, I thought I was doing OK,

but I thought to myself, really, you

it's just the pressure is enormous.

And to have somebody say that to me felt

like I had

everybody in the school of nursing's

weight on my back.

And I thought to myself,

You would never say that to anybody else.

Being on the tenure track

or being in education, it's

just it's just hard.

But it's it's doubly hard

when you're a faculty of color

because it's

not just your program or research.

It's the scrutiny.

And then on top of that is the student

scrutiny, too,

which is always

a different layer of challenge.

And so you prove

you have to prove yourself every day.