



Listening to (and Learning from) B-town's Young Black Leaders

In what seems like another lifetime, I was a college instructor. Trained in rhetoric and composition, I taught writing courses. I also taught women and gender studies, but always with a heavy writing component. As a contract faculty member, I taught four classes a semester, every semester. To say I got tired of commenting on and grading papers is an understatement. When people ask me if I miss teaching, I generally say no.

What I miss are the students.

Whether I was helping freshmen learn the ins and outs of argumentation or teaching a gender studies capstone course with seniors, the conversations I had or overheard in those classrooms were often eye-opening. Given the freedom to express their opinions—and a safe space in which to do it—young people can offer a refreshing outlook on the world, as well as a certain kind of wisdom. Yes, a lot of what they are discovering is not new to those of us who are decades older, but listening to them sort it out can offer new insights.

I got a reminder of what I've been missing when I sat down to conduct interviews with 10 amazing young people for the feature on page 94 ("Bloomington's Black Leaders of Tomorrow"). We met in the study rooms at the Monroe County Public Library, spaces which are convenient but stark. And yet, as we got to know one another, those rooms became warm and full of life.

The questions I asked ranged from the kind kids have come to expect from inquiring adults—about favorite school subjects and future college and career goals—to more difficult-to-discuss top-

ics about race and discrimination. I'm white and they're black, so these were hard questions for me to ask and hard for them to answer.

Let's be honest: We don't do a great job of discussing race in this country. Yet each of these young people came at it with honesty and openness, allowing me a glimpse into what it is like to be a black kid in Bloomington. Whether they felt they had yet to experience overt racism or were certain that, yes, they had and on a regular basis, they shared their stories with me so I could share them with you.

I am so happy I got the opportunity to meet these 10 young people. Sure, they are all great students and offer service to the community, participate in clubs and play on sports teams, win awards and accolades. But they are also just fun to be around. At the end of one particularly engaging interview that had been, by turns, thoughtful and serious and sometimes silly, I turned to the young woman's mother and asked where she had found such a great kid. The smile I received in reply was an acknowledgement that her daughter is, indeed, something pretty special. All of these kids are.

As a teacher, one of the things I dreaded was grading. But I didn't have to grade these young people—I could just enjoy getting to know them. I hope you'll read the story and enjoy getting to know them, too.

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