

October 2019

Letter to the Editor

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Recommended Citation

Tyson, R. M. (2019). Letter to the Editor. *JADARA*, 25(4). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol25/iss4/5>

I am a recruiter and admissions counselor at NTID, responsible for meeting with students, teachers, parents, counselors in 12 states, to talk not only about NTID, but other postsecondary programs available to deaf students. Before accepting my current position I worked in a school for the deaf and in private industry as a deaf black professional. I believe my experiences have given me a lot of insight about issues related to postsecondary education and career opportunities for deaf black adults. I do not want to focus too much on the negatives, but rather on what I have seen and observed on visits throughout my 12 states.

We all know that based on the existing literature, there is an under-representation of deaf black students in postsecondary institutions. We know also that black people in professional and technical fields tend not only to be under-represented, but frequently hold jobs that are not on a level with their skills and abilities. The first impression I get from students on my visits to predominantly black schools is that students never saw a black professional person before. The students see a black person... they stare. The first thing they ask you is, "Are you hearing or deaf?" When they learn that I am deaf they react in tremendous shock as if they never saw a deaf black professional person before. Some of them thought of me as a student and couldn't believe that a person who is deaf and black would be working and traveling as a professional. Because I always voice for myself when presenting, they still think of me as a hearing person. Finally, I show them my hearing aid and they believe me. To me, all of this reflects the problems of self-esteem and the limited perception of deafness that many of these students experience.

When I get into the subject of life after high school, many of the students are undecided or shrug their shoulders when asked what they want to do after high school. Some say, "I will go to work," "I will find a job," "I will work for McDonald's," "I will get SSI." At one predominantly black school, most of them said, "I will stay home and have a good time collecting SSI." As you can see from the student's reactions, their attitudes also reflect poor self-concepts related to their own skills and abilities. Students think they are not good enough to do anything other than work in McDonald's. They seem to think they don't have potential because of their deafness, so they limit themselves to factory work and McDonald's.

At other schools, younger students, especially the boys, all had big dreams of becoming professional basketball or football players. Most of them were really influenced by TV and set unrealistic goals to be professional athletes. They have been seeing too much of Michael Jordan and Bo Jackson. The younger girls would have their minds set for modeling. To let them know that modeling is the impossible dream, I told them how I wanted to be a model when I was younger, but never made it. For instance, I participated in pageants, theater and dance. As I matured, I realized the true reason I wanted to be a model was for self-esteem... to feel good about myself, not for the glamour of it or to be in the limelight, but to feel like I was somebody.

Those students who had unrealistic goals did not even mention college. However, there were a few students who stated they were going to the big name colleges such as UCLA, TSU, Howard, etc. None of them mentioned NTID or Gallaudet. The students were unaware of admissions requirements. They had no idea that the requirements for those schools are very high and competitive. It never occurred to them that this would be a problem. They never even thought of support services. When told specifically about NTID or Gallaudet, they would say, "Too far," "NY, kill-kill... no way!" "Dirty, ugly place... bums... homeless people... crazy traffic," etc. Others would say, "Mom won't permit... too far from family... no way, I cherish my family!" As you can see, many students lack not only appropriate career counseling, but their view and understanding of the world around them is often very limited and narrow in perception.

Perhaps one of the most significant problems I have noticed is that most of the deaf black students I have met in my travels would not be able to meet admissions requirements in many postsecondary educational institutions. We need to make sure students are prepared for postsecondary education. There is a fear of arousing false hopes if they are not academically prepared for college. Many do not know that it takes good reading, language, and math skills to enter and be successful in college. Thus, many of the students are not prepared academically. Deaf black students do not get the support and encouragement they need from their parents and teachers. We need to try and change parental attitudes about deafness. We need

to let them know that it is alright to be deaf and a deaf child can be raised into a successful adult providing they get the support and encouragement they need. One way for parents to become more supportive of their child is for them to become involved in the education and placement of the child. I let my parents know that I was interested in college and they did not try to stop me. Parents should try to encourage their child to seek postsecondary education and not hold them back because in the long run, they will see their child's education as an investment. The end results would be a great pay-off. Parents, too, need to be exposed to postsecondary educational opportunities available for deaf students as well as deaf black role models.

Teachers need to be more aware of issues related to the deaf black child, such as the lack of role models, lack of exposure to careers and the world around them, and issues regarding parental involvement in the educational process. Discrimination and prejudice still exist in the schools. Some teachers tend to focus more on the college-bound students. Blacks are often eliminated from this group, since teachers often have low expectations of black students. Teachers feel that black deaf students cannot make it, so why bother to trying to help them. I have often seen some teachers ignore the needs of deaf black students. When I am visiting schools, teachers would speak highly of the white students but would never say anything about the black students. I once observed a teacher handing back graded papers. Each time she handed back a paper, she would say, "Good work, I'm proud of you. What a great improvement!" But, when she came across a black male, she gave the paper back graded D- with no comment. The student probably thought to himself, "What the heck, she doesn't care, why should I?" At least the teacher should have said, "You can do better." Also, during her lecture she was focusing only on the white students, not this black student. She was asking everyone else questions except this black student. As a black person I was really offended. Perhaps this black student was a problem student or had an attitude problem, but that shouldn't have given her a right to ignore him. All the time this black student was talking to a girl, and she didn't even bother to tell them to pay attention. Most of the teachers are white with few or no black teachers at all. If there are black teachers present in the classroom, they are generally teachers' aides.

From all of my experiences visiting these schools, it would be very easy for me to conclude that deaf black students lack positive role models in their lives. I believe that we, deaf black professionals, can be a positive influence in helping young deaf black children of all ages. Not only can we be the much needed role models, but we can do more to provide encouragement, motivation, leadership, and academic success. Such efforts can be channelled into activities such as Big Brother/Sister programs, programs in remedial English, Math, and Science, summer camp with emphasis on encouraging leadership, early exposure to postsecondary education, career opportunities, etc. I believe the responsibility is ours. If we do not help our deaf black children, who will?

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