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DATE

September 13, 2020

DURATION

31m 38s

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:02]**

Chappaqua, New York, a scenic little town, prettiest in the fall, I think.

[00:00:09]

Best known for its greenery and extensive trails tucked away in the woods of our backyards at one point home for Vanessa Williams and I, two young black girls growing up in this quaint town, about a 45 minute drive from the New York City.

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Again, I prefer to take that scenic route to get there.

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Vanessa and I, decades apart, seem to face similar experiences as a person of color. Growing up in a predominantly white community, a sense of loneliness begins to rise as a reflection of yourself becomes harder and harder to find in skin tone, hair texture or the dichotomy of living in this seemingly homogeneous town. Chappaqua recently fell subject to a bit of a public scandal involving some high school students and the N-word. This event was merely one public example of the town's intolerance and ignorance towards its black students experienced by me, Vanessa, and countless others, again, decades apart. This podcast is created in partnership with Breakthrough.

[00:01:22]

My name is Lauren Stockmann Brown, and thank you for tuning in.

[00:01:37]

So first off, how we start, if you could just say your name, your gender and your preferred pronouns.

[00:01:44]

I'm Vanessa Williams. I am female and my preferred pronoun is Miss Miss her.

[00:01:53]

She devah us. Perfect.

[00:01:59]

So, Vanessa, I want to also, Cinar, some of this discussion on the things you talked about in the Board of Education meeting. I feel like you got, you know, five minutes to kind of explore these super complex topics that, you know, look, you could talk about for hours.

[00:02:14]

So I first want to talk about I want you to share your growing up experience in Chappaqua and how you ended up in Chappaqua.

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Well, my parents moved to Chappaqua, Milward, which is in the town of New Castle, Millwood, Chappaqua and part of Mount Kisco are part of the Chappaqua school system. My parents were driving to look at another house and they saw a for sale sign on our house off Route one hundred. I was one years old and they got a mortgage on the house and moved in. They chose it because it was equidistant to my mom's. She's a music school teacher, so it was equidistant to Ossining and to Elmsford, where my dad was a music teacher. So that's basically it wasn't particularly planned out, but just more, you know, convenience and their new jobs.

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So only black family noad only black girl.

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When I went to first grade at Royan Brook as best director was not built yet.

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In second grade was when I saw another black girl lined up across the hall from a waiting to get into her class, and her name was Tony covid.

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But I didn't know who she was. I was in the second grade. She was in third. Our eyes met and I had no idea who it was.

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And then we were at the AMPE and Milward and we walked into the MP and Tony and her mom were walking out. And that's when I identified her. And we were best friends ever since then.

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So I had an ally from second grade on, even though we were in different grades.

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What I chose to talk about when we had this emergency board of Education meeting where the world was on fire and it was a good idea for them to talk about racism within Chappaqua, I honestly think that a lot of people have no idea that some of their comments are insensitive, that someone might find it insulting when people touch your hair without permission and invade your personal space and.

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I grew up in the 60s to the 70s, graduated in eighty one.

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There were no white guys that would date black girls at our school, most of our dates were through Hansel and Gretel, Jack and Jill and other black families that lived in Westchester. Hmm. And that's that was our social life. Besides playing in the band, which I did, and in theater, that was my life at school. But socially it was off campus.

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So I have to ask. Yeah. I have to ask.

[00:05:14]

You came back to Chappaqua and you raised your family in Chappaqua. Can I ask why after experience, that lack of diversity and this visibility of racism has always been there, but now we're talking about the tipping point of it. Right? So what what was going through your head when you made that decision to raise your your family there?

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Coincidentally enough, I made the decision to move after Rodney King was beat down and L.A. was on fire and I would walk into a grocery store and there would be bare shelves and it felt like war time. And I would go to the the gas station and there would be somebody with a monkey wrench ready to fight because everybody was so fearful.

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That is exactly what we feel now. And that in 92 is exactly what I was running from. I said, let me get to a place where I can raise my two girls. At the time there were three and five. I want to get back to my parents.

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They're both teaching. I can control the situation there. I can still record, do movies, do theater and have New York as my base and not be in L.A. where I knew the racism was systemic.

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And, you know, when I was there for seven years, I knew that the police were also a big part of the Klan.

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When they let all the four officers go after the Rodney King beating on film, they let them all go.

[00:06:47]

They were tried in Simi Valley, which is a very sheltered place. So that's exactly why I moved back here to shelter from the mayhem. Malibu is on fire. I mean, I remember coming in from I did some publicity for my new album at the time, and we were flying in from Germany and they wouldn't let the plane land because they were shooting at the planes.

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So we had to land in Vegas, wait till the smoke died down from all the fires. And then we finally got a chance to to land in LAX. So that's basically why I came.

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So you were leaving.

[00:07:24]

Racism, right, and police brutality and that extreme violence to then enter into a predominantly white community, which you're familiar with, so to a more familiar kind of racism, which made it seem bearable. Right. So it's like you truly like there was no there was no clear answer. I feel like when you're put in that situation, where am I going to raise my my my two girls who are people of color? Where will they feel most safe?

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Right.

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So raising your children in a community like Chappaqua, I'm sure most people don't know that you were escaping a different form of racism, right. So when you're in that more socioeconomic form of racism, what are some of the differences that you noticed and what are some of the differences that you noticed raising your young black girls and the twins in comparison to your experience growing up in Chappaqua in the 70s and 80s?

[00:08:21]

Yes, like the most. Yeah, I think the most important thing, which I think your parents did and my parents did was connect with all the other black families within the town. So there was a sense of solidarity. So you would have you'd see each other in school, but also know that somebody had your back and the families knew each other, too. That helps. It's again, creating community.

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So I have that growing up.

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And I made sure that, you know, Roberta, you know, all of our little friends here in Chappaqua, we made sure that our kids knew each other and socialize with each other and had a separate life outside of school. The big thing that I brought up in the in the board of Ed emergency meeting was that high school to me was like college.

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It was open. It was free. You were you were your your your best advocate. But I saw examples of excellence everywhere. I mentioned Dr. Niyazi, who was a French teacher from Haiti, impeccably dressed, elegant, brown skin, salt and pepper, beautiful hair. And that was an example of excellence. And you could see him catch I. I didn't even take French with him, but I knew that he was a man of color and I felt solidarity there. Then there was Dr. Lee, who was light skinned. He was a scientist. He's a science teacher. Again, a doctor and an example of excellence on campus. Dr. Douglas, who is from Spain, who again wore, you know, jackets and scarves and spoke with a Castillian accent, but was otherworldly.

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So she appreciated diversity and could allow and I took I took Spanish from her, but she felt that you were, you know, a child of the community of the world. And that was the big difference on campus as a student. So you felt like this world of nations that were present and if there was an incident that happened, you had an ally to go to because they understood.

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And that's what I think the big difference is. Again, I don't know what they are. I don't know what the faculty is like there, but it's certainly not what it used to be back in the 70s and 80s.

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Yes, I definitely do not have that some class of sixteen, twenty, sixteen. I'm like, really? And I did not have that.

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And I'm wondering now, what do you think is the importance of representation beyond the more obvious answers? Right. You yourself are an example of representation in the media. Right. If we want to talk about you gaining your Miss America award. Right. What is the importance of that representation in the classroom and outside the classroom for a young black girl, particularly growing up in a predominantly white community?

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Unfortunately, if it's predominantly white, it's up to the parents to show them other. And luckily, I had great parents. My mom took me to see Nikki Giovanni in Austin read poetry that was not part of the curriculum, but it was always taking me to the theater to see your arms too short to box for God. It was going to see, you know, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Alvin Ailey.

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It's really up to the parents because the. If the if the.

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If the faculty is there, they need to either bring in people to discuss things that are of varied backgrounds so they see that slice of a different life. If they can't infiltrate the faculty and make a diverse or it's up to the parents to come up with those different adventures.

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Yes. Yes.

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So something that I've been experiencing, too, is in my generation, I'm 22. So there's a lot of frustration from some of the black people that I'm friends with, which is like I've always or just that I've felt I'll speak in my terms. Right. I've felt a level of frustration where, again, I've always been black. I've always had these issues. I've always faced this this system of oppression that our school is now truly trying to be proactive about. Have you felt that frustration as someone who's went through the school district, race your kids through the school district?

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And if so, how do you make sense of it or curve it into something that's more productive for society, let's say?

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Well, I always say life is like high school. You can't wait to get out of it because you it's and you go through all your ups and downs and then you get into the workforce at the same stuff. You got your your jocks over there. You've got, you know, everyone split up into groups.

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You've got your overachievers, you've got the ones that are slackers. And you're like, wait a minute, didn't I just leave the same dynamic?

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So I tell that to my kids, you know, I know it's frustrating. You're going to see these same people when you get older, no matter what you do, whether it's in a corporate boardroom or whether it's on a cast, there's always one, you know, that's going to be an issue. And that's. That's that's kind of life, so, you know, it's it makes you stronger and more resilient, and I get that comment all the time. Wow. Everything you look at life and it seems easier said. Yeah. You can decide what's going to stress you out and you can decide what's not.

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And you know your own worth. And that's the bottom line. The older you get, you realize that I can choose to engage or not. And that's what that's a great lesson, too, because the choice is yours.

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You can get hyped up or you don't have to, you know, and that's just a life lesson.

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So I also want to kind of pivot our conversation into the topic of black hair, again, this unique systemic oppression on black hair and what that means to you and raising two girls, which are and they're now three girls, three girls. OK, awesome. Awesome. Right. Do you have any stories to share of your own or theirs? If you feel comfortable where they felt like they stuck out because of the curliness of their hair or they had this unique desire to straighten their hair or if they just felt uncomfortable by it.

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Do you have any stories like that?

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Oh, have tons of stories, so, you know, I grew up in a time where you had your hair, natural, new and braids and of course you go to school and people want to touch your braids.

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And then probably I think fourth grade is when I got my first perm. And before that, my mother used to sit me by the time I was at the fire by the stove. And you get your hair pressed and you got your hot come on the burner and you got your grease and you get your hair s. once a week and you get it pressed out and put in braids. And that was going to last you for the week. So the older, more active I got one of the black neighbors who moved into mill with the other black family, moved in down the street and she would relax my hair downstairs and her her her her playroom. And at the time I think it was ultra sheen, which was really like heavy duty stuff. And then we moved on to Revlon, which still is like stick straight in your your ears would be burning and your scalp would be on fire. But but the the old folks would say it takes the fight out of your hair. So people have been straightening conking, waving Marcellin their hair for for ages. And it was huge, obviously a huge industry. So when my kids and then also within the black community, there's. Does she have good hair or not? Is it there a fight or not? And you can tell the good hair lay down when you'd wet it, it would just curl perfectly.

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So I did not have good hair. My hair was nappy and I had to relax my hair in order to get it, take the fight out of it. And again, that these are all old school terms. So when I had my my kids and I continue to relax my hair up until probably the last 10 years or so when I had my my girls again, the ritual of braiding it and and conditioning it and and keeping it healthy was something that, you know, as a black mother. And then when you let them take care of their own hair, that's when it starts breaking off. And they don't understand because their systems are not in place. Melanie was in kindergarten and I was making Thanksgiving dinner. And I she's, you know, five years old and she comes in, she's got stitches on one hand and she's like, look, she had cut she had cut bangs, but like, cut it. Like there was like now. And so we we ended up doing like an asymmetrical. Some people do. So like one side was long, long story short, that lasted for a little bit.

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And then she got into braids and we did fox braids. I had to bring her down to Brooklyn because I didn't know anybody around here that could do it. And to Comic Kings. And she was she was getting her hair braided then and not too many I mean, kids would look at her hair and want to touch it, but she's she's very standoffish. But, you know, you don't want to mess with her if she says now, which is so she was she was fine with it. Nobody saw she was a swimmer. And so she was constantly in chlorinated water with their swimming cap on. And, you know, she wished she had better hair because it would be wouldn't be it would be easier that to handle. And that was what she had to struggle with that. Luckily, there was another black girl on the same body type, same age that was on the team with her. So even though she felt like she was didn't have the silky straight hair that everybody could just whip up under their cap, she knew that she had an ally who lived in Mount Kisco who swam with her. So so it's it's been great that they've been able to find someone that they can rely on as an ally.

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But there's still, you know, in school, there's still. Judgment, they've tried, they've tried weaves, they've tried braids, they've done relaxers, I just finished doing a movie called Bad Hair and it's a it's a horror flick that Jason Simian, who wrote Dear White People, this is a horror film that's coming out on Hulu in October. Yeah. Before MTV, people used to have their own video shows. And I play a this is a black video station, but we're taking it to the MTV stage. So we want to I wanted to make sure that all my assistants had long straight hair and I send them to this particular black hair salon to get a weave to assimilate. And that's when the drama starts happening. So it's very deep because everyone's got hair issues. And I did a movie called Stompin at the Savoy. And when I get in the sun, I get light streaks in front of my hair. And when I was performing it, it was just the streaks would just come up naturally. No problem. Mm hmm. So I remember this one actress in Sombath Savoy Theatre was a big dance hall in Harlem in the 1930s, and all the swing bands would come and everybody would dance to do the jitterbug.

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So I remember showing up on set in North Carolina and this particular actress said and Debbie Allen was our director and.

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This particular actress said, I thought I thought Debbie said we couldn't have any color in our hair as that only color my hair said the eyes, I can believe the color. So it's like, OK, where are we really going to go there? But again, that's within my own race, getting try trying to get called out for something that's my natural color as I've gotten older. This is you know, I've got a clip right here because I've been doing that. Yeah. But again, it's it's the drag. And then when I'm at home and that's just part of being on camera doing radio shows and morning shows and and all kinds of stuff. So it's part of it's part of my my drag, as I say.

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Oh, wait, that's amazing. Because I saw you on Ripple's Drag Race. So a part of your drag. Can you explain what that what that means to people who might not know that term?

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So as a performer, you know, I'm a showgirl. I sing, I dance, I wear beautiful clothing when I'm performing and when I'm doing anything, I've got to look the part. So my drag is OK. It's time for another interview. Let me get out my kit and I put on the makeup and the lashes and make sure my eyebrows are defined. And then I plug in my hair and I got rows of hair that I shake and come and plug them in to get me to give me a fuller, a fuller lot that'll look good on television. And that's part of the drag. It's just what you do getting into the celebrity as opposed to, you know, I have no shoes on right now. I'm wearing my daughter's dress because I ran out of clothes and bought everything on camera. And as soon as I finish with you, I'm going to unhook my hair, you know, take off my my makeup and and, you know, put on some shorts.

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So when you talk about that. Right, the drag, the putting yourself out, making yourself up to you to present yourself in a certain way for you, it's a career and it makes sense. But does it ever, like, mentally drain on you or do you ever feel the need to assimilate in a way that doesn't feel like you?

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You know, at this point in my career, I can kind of do what I want, which is lucky in terms of, you know, saying yes to projects that I want to do and people that I want to work with. It's tough when you're young, when you're in your

20s and 30s, you're trying to you know, the reason why I got into recording as I was an actress and a lot of doors were closed, people thought, oh, she's just a beauty queen. It negated any kind of a talent or intellect I had. So they'd want to see me in the room to see, OK, let's let's at least say we we read her, we auditioned her, but it was really hard to be taken seriously. So recording allowed me to sing what I wanted to do, look the way I wanted to and have control over my image and what I sounded like and that back toward me, getting back onto Broadway and doing the other things that I wanted to do initially, that the door was closed because I wasn't taken seriously.

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That makes sense.

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So we're starting to wind down and I really like sorry, I'm looking at my list of questions as well. And I want to get into how your parents or music educators and how the role of theatre and music and the arts continues to. I feel like Papau you, but also ground you in a lot of ways. And I love how your your daughter's in the music industry as well. And I think it would be really brilliant to to talk a little about that, how music and the arts in general make you feel just ground. You have music in the arts in general, ground you and your experiences and your family.

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Again, I think it all comes back to how you're raised. You were raised in a house full of intelligent, bright, smart, loving, ambitious people. And you see by example, I was surrounded by music. Both my parents not only taught at school, but they gave lessons after school. So I would come home from school and my dad would be upstairs giving a clarinet or a trumpet lesson to my mom would be downstairs giving a piano lesson and I would be in my room hearing two contrasting lessons going on. And then they would sing in the Westchester Choir on Sunday. So we'd have to come and listen to baroque music. So we learned about Bach and I just found out that Beethoven was black, which is fantastic. If you have you got to Google. Was Beethoven black? It's fascinating. And yes, he's my fave, but so music was always part of my life. So I felt and also a requirement. My parents made us take lessons, you know, piano lessons. I took French horn until I graduated high school was when it was cool to drop my instrument. My parents like now that's not an option in our household. We do it until we graduate. So as a result, I can walk into a studio and say, can I see the lead sheet?

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Because I want to read what the music says as opposed to here is a lyric sheet. Sing me, sing me what the melody is. I now I print out, made the lead sheet so I can read what it is and I want to go and work it out myself.

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So it's great to be not just the girl singer behind the mic, but respected as a musician.

[00:26:48]

Hmm. You've raised boys and girls, right? Sons and daughters. Have you seen any difference between their relationship to their hair specifically as you raised them, you know, when they were younger?

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Interesting enough, my son is has had a lot of hair dos and he wrote a beautiful piece on Instagram about kids in ballet school wanting to touch his hair without his permission. And he got so annoyed, he said, listen, you want to touch my hair, I'll give you a pass. And what I gave you that pass, you'll be able to touch my hair and then I get that pass back and don't touch my hair anymore. And he took the power back. So that's just it.

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And I remember he called, said, Mom, you have a picture of me with an afro. And I, I have so many pictures. I was, you know, sifting through and I found one. But he ended up doing his own illustration, which was even better. So Devon, Devon has beautiful, sandy, curly hair. When he was a baby, we kept it tight because his father insisted as it grew out, he grew into an afro and then he had cornrows. But he's been he's been very experimental with his hair. And and I think all my kids have been pretty experimental with with their hair in terms of they've all had braids, I've had cornrows. We've all done done the summer cornrow, the summer box braids. And I think we've all checked off all the boxes for all the hairstyles.

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That's awesome. So it's very family oriented. Another way of finding a community within something that you all can relate to. So I think that's really, really. Yeah.

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You know, you guys are so lucky at your age right now. There are so many examples that you can literally of hair color, texture, style, face skin, body dolls, toys. I mean, you know, I'm 57. When I grew up, there was one doll who was black that I got from my friend Tony Cawood, who is made in Sweden. Her name was it was a their name was Sasha Doll. And that was back in the sixties. And that's that was the one doll that we had to import with brown skin, you know. So you guys are so lucky to have this plethora of images that you can always feel some kind of alliance with, which is fantastic for just community and and support.

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Yes, it's my last question officially. What do you think is the importance of having conversations like this one that Michael Sulmona project tries to emphasize and highlight?

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Knowledge is power. It's as simple as that.

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The more you know, the more the more you can educate yourself and be a better person and feel better about yourself. Ignorance is really the thing that stifles people and makes them.

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I can't say ignorance makes them ignorant, but but, you know, it fuels fear and fear creates all this ridiculous reaction of the fear of the unknown. So I always ask questions. That's the one thing that the Jewish community is always they in all their teaching and education, if they embed in their education, always ask questions. You have the right to know. You have the right to to seek the answers. And we as as a black community should always remember that we always have the right to ask. We always have the right to know and drill down on on what the truth is. And I think, again, you can see it on Instagram.

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There are stories and and that are happening that don't even you know, that there's education that's happening on a global level about our past, about the future. That is amazing. And that is all of a community saying, watch this, look at this. Did you know about this? This is that history. Oh, check out this history.

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It's profound.

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Amazing, perfect finish. I'm really appreciative. I know you must be so busy and stuff, so I really, truly appreciate you sharing your thoughts with us. I really just I thank you so much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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