

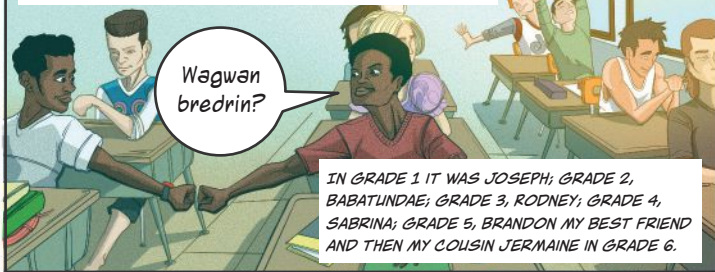
BECOMING

MR. PARKER

Story: Andrew Parker

Illustration: Kyle Smith

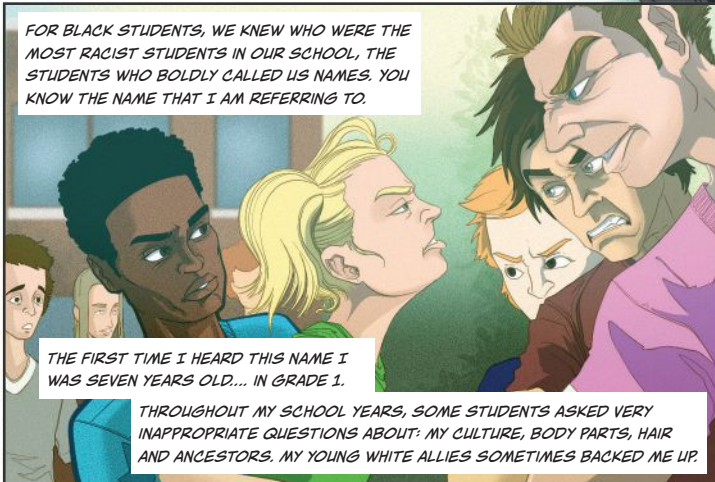
I WAS THE ONLY BLACK STUDENT IN MY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS. WELL, MAYBE NOT THE ONLY ONE. THERE WAS ALWAYS ONE OTHER BLACK STUDENT. EVERY YEAR. BUT THEIR FACE AND NAME CHANGED. EVERY YEAR.



Wagwan bredrin?

IN GRADE 1 IT WAS JOSEPH; GRADE 2, BABATUNDAE; GRADE 3, RODNEY; GRADE 4, SABRINA; GRADE 5, BRANDON MY BEST FRIEND AND THEN MY COUSIN JERMAINE IN GRADE 6.

FOR BLACK STUDENTS, WE KNEW WHO WERE THE MOST RACIST STUDENTS IN OUR SCHOOL, THE STUDENTS WHO BOLDLY CALLED US NAMES. YOU KNOW THE NAME THAT I AM REFERRING TO.



THE FIRST TIME I HEARD THIS NAME I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD... IN GRADE 1.

THROUGHOUT MY SCHOOL YEARS, SOME STUDENTS ASKED VERY INAPPROPRIATE QUESTIONS ABOUT: MY CULTURE, BODY PARTS, HAIR AND ANCESTORS. MY YOUNG WHITE ALLIES SOMETIMES BACKED ME UP.

IN MY HOME, FROM A YOUNG AGE, I WAS TAUGHT ABOUT BLACK HISTORY, RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION ... EVENTS LIKE RODNEY KING AND EMMET TILL. MARTIN LUTHER KING, MALCOLM X, HARRIET TUBMAN, MARCUS GARVEY - THESE WERE OUR HEROES.



Who said 'I have a dream'?

Martin Luther King!



Y'all watch Fresh Prince last night?

Aunt Viv's dance was dope!

WE WOULD SHARE STORIES ABOUT OUR FAVOURITE TV SHOWS WITH PREDOMINANTLY BLACK ACTORS.

ONE TIME BRANDON AND I GOT INTO A FIGHT WITH FOUR BOYS WHO CALLED US RACIAL SLURS.

WE GOT INTO MORE TROUBLE THAN THE BULLIES DID.



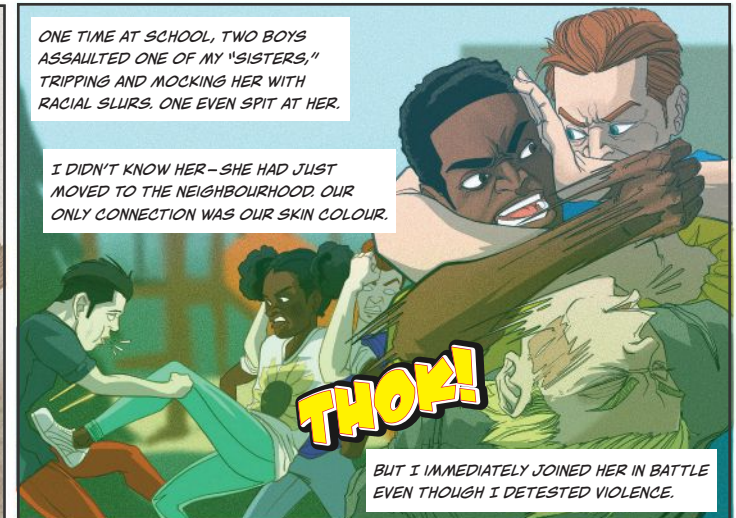
I'm so mad.

Stick to the vision, bro.

WE LEARNED TO PICK OUR BATTLES.

ONE TIME AT SCHOOL, TWO BOYS ASSAULTED ONE OF MY "SISTERS," TRIPPING AND MOCKING HER WITH RACIAL SLURS. ONE EVEN SPIT AT HER.

I DIDN'T KNOW HER - SHE HAD JUST MOVED TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD. OUR ONLY CONNECTION WAS OUR SKIN COLOUR.



THOK!

BUT I IMMEDIATELY JOINED HER IN BATTLE EVEN THOUGH I DETESTED VIOLENCE.

MRS. MILLINGTON

MY FIRST BLACK TEACHER WAS MRS. MILLINGTON IN JUNIOR HIGH. SHE WAS DARK SKINNED, EBONY ELEGANCE.

MS. SMITH

ROSALIND SMITH WAS MY FIRST AND ONLY BLACK PRINCIPAL. SHE TAUGHT ME THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECTING THE CULTURE.

Black Queen majesty.

I MISBEHAVED ONCE, BUT ONE GOOD TALK MADE ME RESPECT ALL QUEENS IN THIS PROFESSION.

AT M.E. LAZERTE HIGH SCHOOL ON EDMONTON'S NORTH SIDE (MY NEIGHBOURHOOD), I HAD TO BALANCE BETWEEN BEING COOL, STRONG, REAL, FUN AND COMPASSIONATE.

How do you want to be remembered?

MY HERO AND COACH THOM ELNISKI HELPED ME GREATLY IN THIS PROCESS, OF BECOMING A MAN. MY LIFE CHANGED WHEN HE HELPED ME ANSWER HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT LIFE.

AFTER COACH ELNISKI PASSED AWAY IN 2004, I REFLECTED ON MY FUTURE. MY MOM SUGGESTED I BECOME A TEACHER. SHE WAS MY WISDOM, AND ONE OF THE FIRST BLACK INSTRUCTORS AT THE NORTHERN ALBERTA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY. I REALIZED THAT I WANTED TO DO THE WORK THAT SHE (AND MR. E) DID.

AT UNIVERSITY, I WAS ALMOST ALWAYS THE ONLY BLACK STUDENT IN MY CLASSES, BUT MY EXPERIENCE WAS AWESOME! EXCEPT FOR THE TIME WHEN ONE OF MY PROFESSORS USED THE PHRASE "LIPITTY (N-WORD)" IN A LECTURE. I LEFT THE ROOM. THAT NIGHT I SENT HIM A LETTER ABOUT HOW THAT WORD AFFECTED ME. THE NEXT DAY HE PUBLICLY APOLOGIZED, AND WE MOVED ON.

AS A YOUNGER TEACHER, I WAS SO EAGER TO LEARN. AND I WAS EAGER TO TEACH. I WAS SO EAGER TO BE IN A ROOM WHERE STUDENTS COULD SEE AN AFRICAN CANADIAN AT THE FRONT OF THE CLASS.

DURING MY STUDENT TEACHING, I WAS FORTUNATE TO COACH THE SENIOR AND JUNIOR MEN'S BASKETBALL TEAMS. I WAS THRILLED TO DO THIS WORK.

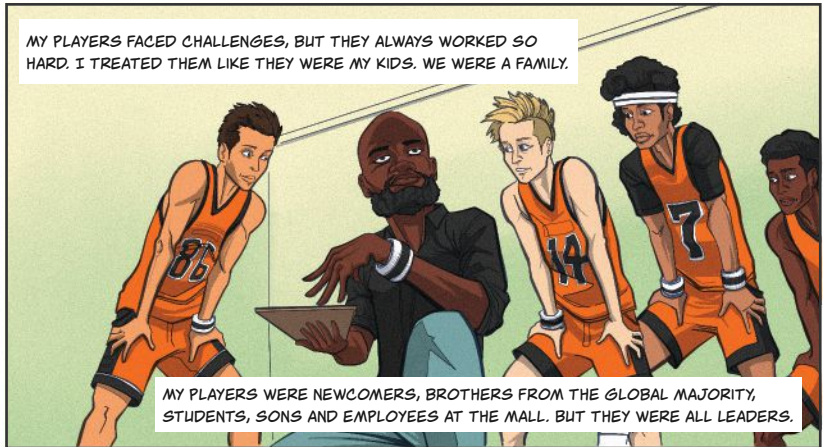
I WANTED TO INFLUENCE MY COMMUNITY THE WAY THAT COACH ELNISKI HAD INFLUENCED MY LIFE.



SADLY, ON THREE OCCASIONS, I HAD BLACK YOUTH TELL ME THAT COACHES FROM OTHER SCHOOLS HAD TOLD THEM NOT TO ATTEND M.E. LAZERTE.

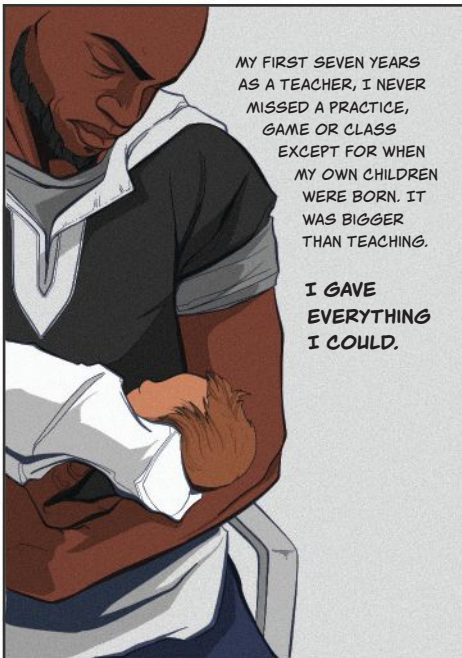
I WONDERED IF THOSE COACHES KNEW HOW RACIST THEY SOUNDED. I DID.

You could end up like Parker and the other 'Northsiders.'



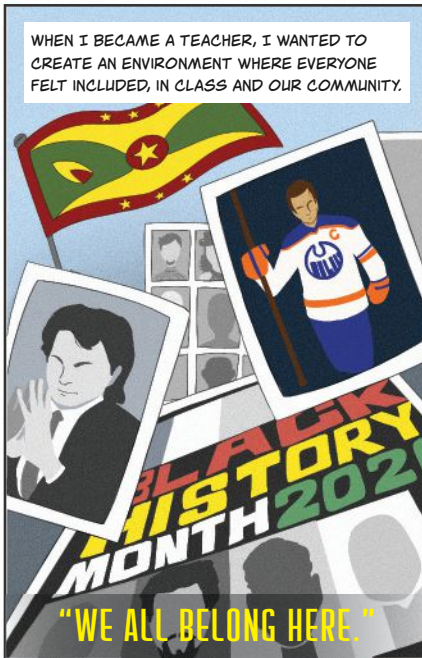
MY PLAYERS FACED CHALLENGES, BUT THEY ALWAYS WORKED SO HARD. I TREATED THEM LIKE THEY WERE MY KIDS. WE WERE A FAMILY.

MY PLAYERS WERE NEWCOMERS, BROTHERS FROM THE GLOBAL MAJORITY, STUDENTS, SONS AND EMPLOYEES AT THE MALL. BUT THEY WERE ALL LEADERS.



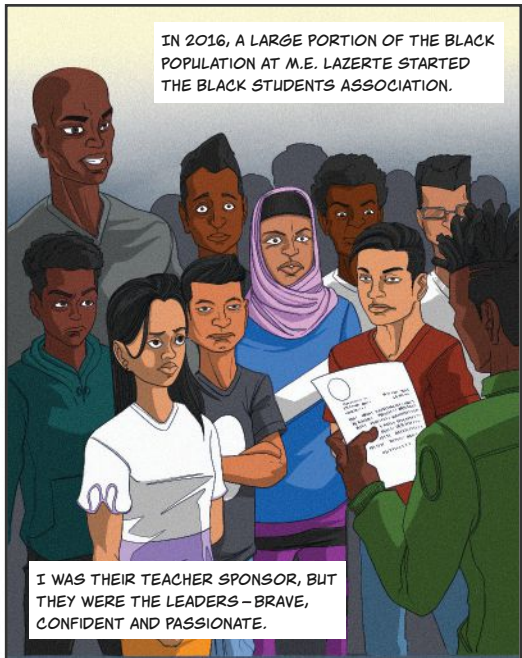
MY FIRST SEVEN YEARS AS A TEACHER, I NEVER MISSED A PRACTICE, GAME OR CLASS EXCEPT FOR WHEN MY OWN CHILDREN WERE BORN. IT WAS BIGGER THAN TEACHING.

I GAVE EVERYTHING I COULD.



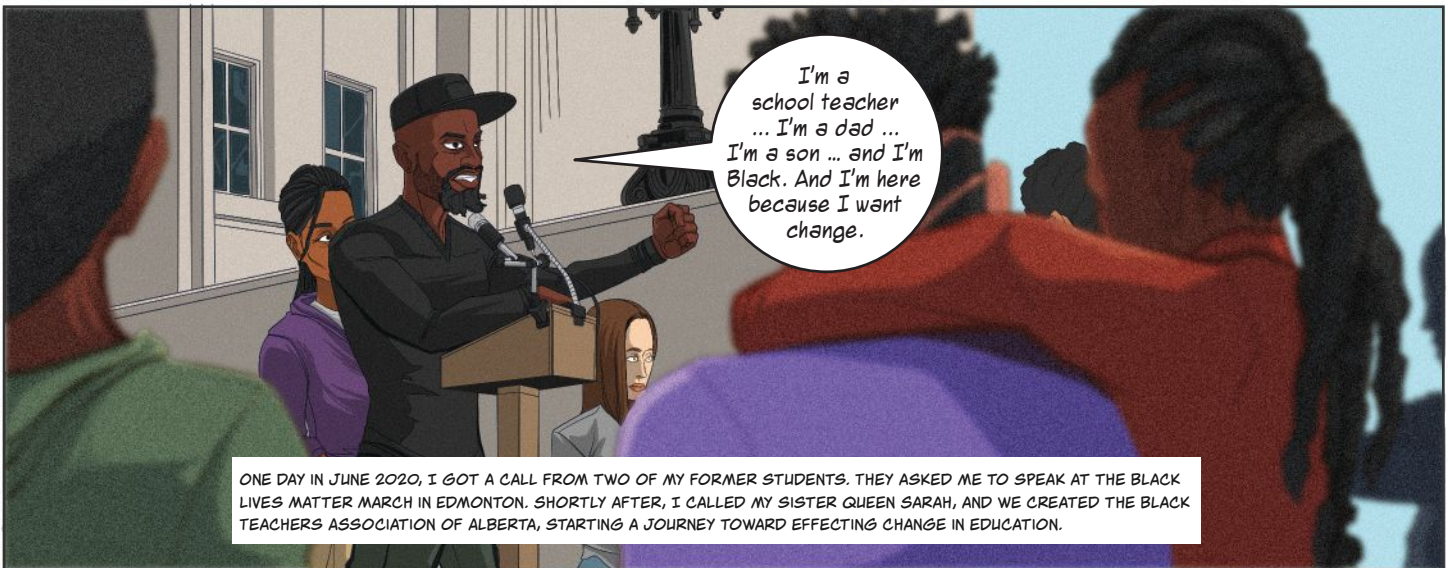
WHEN I BECAME A TEACHER, I WANTED TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE EVERYONE FELT INCLUDED, IN CLASS AND OUR COMMUNITY.

"WE ALL BELONG HERE."



IN 2016, A LARGE PORTION OF THE BLACK POPULATION AT M.E. LAZERTE STARTED THE BLACK STUDENTS ASSOCIATION.

I WAS THEIR TEACHER SPONSOR, BUT THEY WERE THE LEADERS - BRAVE, CONFIDENT AND PASSIONATE.



I'm a school teacher ... I'm a dad ... I'm a son ... and I'm Black. And I'm here because I want change.

ONE DAY IN JUNE 2020, I GOT A CALL FROM TWO OF MY FORMER STUDENTS. THEY ASKED ME TO SPEAK AT THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MARCH IN EDMONTON. SHORTLY AFTER, I CALLED MY SISTER QUEEN SARAH, AND WE CREATED THE BLACK TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA, STARTING A JOURNEY TOWARD EFFECTING CHANGE IN EDUCATION.