

ONE VERY STRANGE DAY

By James Miles

I just spent the morning with the police. There were 15 law enforcement officers, all white, and they were staring at me. I am rarely out of sorts, but I admit I was very nervous. I knew they were waiting for me to say something, anything.

So...

I said, "When I say mic check, you say 1-2, 1-2. Mic Check!"
"1-2,1-2"

That's when things got interesting...

But first let me explain how I got to be in a room with 15 white law enforcement officers. My friend and colleague, whom I shall call The Doctor, asked me to support a new class he was teaching at a cadet training academy, just outside of Seattle, WA. He would be working with chiefs of police, sheriffs, and corrections officers, all of whom were responsible for training police cadets. This course was to provide strategies of ways to engage with the black and brown communities in Washington State, while providing some context to the local history of race and policing. He invited other educators, principals, professors, and community organizers to be part of the first day. This was a group of people that historically didn't, pardon the language, but "fuck with each other." This was destined to be an enormous breakthrough in police instruction, or a detrimental failure.

HE AND I WERE GIDDY WITH THE POTENTIAL.

When I arrived at the training academy, I parked next to a couple police cruisers and pick up trucks. I heard the cadets-in-training yelling, "Open up the door," while knocking ferociously on the training facility's large doors. Several officers pulled up, got out of their cars, guns in their holster, and walked towards the facility.

Back to school shouldn't mean back to principal's office



by Eaudi Abe

In Seattle Public Schools, African-American middle school students are three-and-a-half times as likely to be disciplined as other students. Although black children make up roughly 20 percent of the overall student body, they account for over 40 percent of all suspensions and expulsions in the district, two-thirds of them male. The discipline gap represents the underbelly of the achievement gap since students can't do the work if they aren't in school.

This is nothing new — in the early 1980s the district assigned a committee to examine why so many black students were being suspended and expelled. That means, at the minimum, we are now well into a third generation of black students who have experienced these adverse conditions. In 2013, the



Above: Black children are disproportionately punished in schools, by police. *Crosscut*, 2017.

I sat in my car, reading my notes, listening to Q-Tip rapping about going on an Award Tour with his man, Muhammad. My heart was beating rapidly, and I was starting to sweat. With some forced courage, I got out of the car and walked towards the main entrance. I was greeted by a young woman of color, behind a desk whom looked at me questioningly.

"Can I help you?"

"Uh, yes, I'm here for The Doctor's class."

"Oh!" She smiled. "Yes, that's great. Why don't you sign in and wait for everyone else to show up?"

As I signed in, I was still reeling in the shock that this administrator was so happy to see me. We were both people of color, but she worked for the cops. I was flummoxed. I looked up to see her still smiling. As I went to take my seat, I passed two huge officers, one white, and another Latinx. They both smiled and said, "Hello, how are you?"

I mumbled a response somewhere between 'mmk' and 'yar.' I sat down and stared at the facility. It reminded of the headquarters of Highline Public Schools. That is not where the similarities ended. Both entities had a woman of color at the front desk. Most of the people in leadership

positions were white. The offices were welcoming, while also having an air that emanates that no-one should overstay their welcome. There a lot of doors that in my mind, hid many mysteries. Most importantly, they were both educational facilities. One for law enforcement, and the other for public education.

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO HMMMM...

The doors to room 134 opened, and I was invited in, along with four other people of color, and two white people that were the community leaders, educators, and principals I mentioned earlier. All of us entered and were greeted with smiles and handshakes. We were invited to sit by The Doctor, and then he looked at me.

"James, you ready to lead your icebreaker?"

I started with the same agreements that I ask of everyone I teach; Participate, Respect, and Mic Check. When the group agreed, I led three icebreakers to get the police officers and the educators talking about art and social media, which is an excellent way to get people from disparate backgrounds to speak to each other and become more vulnerable. After the icebreakers, we sat back down and my friend, The Doctor, began discussing the history of race and disciplines in Seattle. He mentioned the similarities between the police department and teaching department. Both careers are often the most relied upon, and often the most criticized. Both careers are underpaid and work directly with the communities. He then went on to discuss how black people, particularly black boys are treated by the education system and the criminal justice system. He then opened it up for discussion.

That's when I expected resistance and tension. However, just the opposite happened. We all began speaking about our personal histories and reactions to what we heard and read. I spoke about the importance of building relationships, officers spoke about their need to better understand their communities. We spoke of successes and failures. What seemed like 15 minutes, was actually 2 hours of dialogue. I looked at The Doctor and gave him a thumbs up. Magic was happening.

The woman that organized the event, whom happened to be the first woman to lead this position, within the academy, ever, stated how thankful she was that this was happening and everyone's willingness to participate. A principal admitted how he didn't expect this to go well, but was completely surprised by how much he enjoyed the experience. It was one of the most intersectional discussions I've had, with people that may have very different views than I. During lunch, one of the cadet trainers told me how he uses role play with his cadets, and asked for some

“ A PRINCIPAL ADMITTED HOW HE DIDN'T EXPECT THIS TO GO WELL, BUT WAS COMPLETELY SURPRISED ”

more tips. It was one of the most unique, and wondrous educational experiences I've had in years.

It was 1pm when we ended the session. I quickly realized that my day was only just beginning.

I drove to my office to get ready for an event we were having that evening. One of our supporters was hosting a house party to help raise money for one of Arts Corps' Programs called, The Residency. The Residency is a hip hop music and vocal production program we run, in collaboration with The Museum of Pop Culture and Macklemore. This program prepares forty-five 16-19 year olds for careers in the music industry, and other creative fields, through hands on learning, and professional experiences. It is one of our most well known and successful programs. Started as a two week summer intensive, it has grown to year round interactions with students, which means we needed to raise more money to keep this program alive and strong. Arts Corps' motto is Make Art Anyway, so we are devoted to not letting anything hold us back.

After some administrative work was completed, and having my weekly check ins with some of my team, I headed over to help set up the house party with my development team and the hosts. We were having a fully catered event, that even had valet parking. We cut some flowers, moved

Below: *The Residency* Alum and 2018 intern, Brandon Barnes

The Residency

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

THROUGH HIP HOP



some furniture, and set up a sound system. Soon, guests started arriving and I pumped up the background music that was a good mix of Michael Jackson, Tania Marie, Chaka Khan, and Big Pun.

About thirty minutes later, the host gets everyone's attention to talk about why they are here tonight and to prepare everyone for a wonderful evening, featuring youth voice. Four young people get to the stage, one new participant, one returning participant, and two alums of the program. One of those alums is also on the Arts Corps Board. They are joined by one the teaching artists, that work in the program. They will be part of the panel presentation about The Residency. The moderator of the panel is...Macklemore himself.

Macklemore was a great moderator, as he centered the questions on the youth present, and was genuinely intrigued by the youth responses. The youth talked about how being in the program boosted their self confidence, and gave them the skills they needed to write and perform their own music. One student said that she was able to direct her creative energies into also producing music because of her experience. She didn't feel relegated to only being a singer. She was excited about the possibilities to explore what it means to be an artist, in every facet of her life. The students we work with, in The Residency come from varied backgrounds and experiences, and it was wonderful to hear how music helps them cope with issues, and gives them a platform to express themselves, in a safe environment.

“ I WAS LOOKING AT MODERN DAY USA, AS IT SHOULD BE, WITH PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER AROUND POSITIVITY. ”

The crowd was awed by the wisdom of the young people and the urgency in their voice for us all to work together to create a more inclusive society. When I looked around the room, I saw people that were also from different races and backgrounds, from different countries, and whom were both much older, and much younger than I. I was looking at modern day USA, as it should be, with people coming together around positivity. We were all part of a discussion in how we can make a just society, together. As collaborators. That is the power of the arts, to break down barriers, and find a way for everyone to engage with, and understand multiple contexts. I thought about my morning with the police, compared to my evening with artists and educators, and was overwhelmed with joy.

After the panel, Macklemore led the Ask, for the audience to raise their hands to financially support the power of youth voice and youth expression. Macklemore is a dynamic performer and storyteller, and he told a moving speech about the power of arts to unite and change lives.

Coupled with the words from the youth, there was an energy in the audience that inspired many gifts. When everyone was leaving the event, smiles on their faces, tears in their eyes, I was stopped by a man that asked about Arts Corps' other programs. I told him about our in school programs, integrating art into academic content, and our after school programs that take place in schools, community centers, shelters, and low income residential facilities. He couldn't believe one tiny organization could have that much impact. For once, I was speechless, so I said something like "thanks" or "yep."

That's when it hit me: whether we are working with youth, adults, teachers, or police, art is the tool to foment hope. Nothing will stop us from shaping the world into a better place. Nothing will stop us from supporting youth voice and expression. Nothing will stop us from revolutionizing education.

NOTHING WILL STOP US FROM MAKING ART ANYWAY.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Miles is originally from Chicago and moved to Seattle from Brooklyn, NY where he worked as an artist and educator for the past 20 years. Before joining Arts Corps as Executive Director, he was the Director of Education at Urban Arts Partnership, in New York City. James also facilitated workshops and designed curriculum for the New Victory Theater, Roundabout Theatre, Disney Theatrical Group, and others. Previously a professor at NYU, James taught a myriad of classes, ranging from Acting and Directing to EdTech and Special Education. A graduate of Morehouse College and Brandeis University, James has presented at SXSW EDU, NYU's IMPACT Festival, New York Creative Tech Week, EdTechXEurope, Google Educator Bootcamp, and provided Professional Development to teachers across the world. His work has been featured by Pie News, New Profit, Complex Magazine, National Guild, Seattle Times, KOMO, NPR, CBS, NBC, US Department of Education, and ASCD. James is a former accountant, model, and actor. He can be frequently found on social media, as @fresh_professor, writing about arts education, educational policy, and academic inequity.



Follow James on Instagram and Twitter at
@fresh_professor