

The Love & Hate Relationship with Justice

by Ashley James

Years ago, a rookie in my career, I had taken my actions for granted. Preparing for a career in education, no one tells you how your actions in the field would dabble and dabble on the lines of Justice. Sure, as an educator, it's probably defined in your role, and ethics had its own chapter in your textbook. But I'm not an educator, I'm really a transplant media arts geek who fell in love with its responsibility in community development. Because of this, students met me outside my office one day with red eyes, wrinkled foreheads and folded arms. "The culture of my learning space is interfering with my development. What can you do?"

Immediately I wanted to lead the pack and march into the situation demanding their voices be heard. As I calmed them down and listened to their stories, I realized every storyteller was a minority in the STEM field. Many were concerned about their future employment and the lack of development in their current role. I was infuriated because I felt as if their work status and in some situations, their visa status, became a muzzle used to keep their concerns and feelings quiet. I can identify with that feeling as I also once felt, as a minority, that I am

"lucky" to be here and I should not go against the grain or challenge the status quo in my workplace. Because of this, I wanted to take lead and let all of the students know that what was felt was justified and I would try to handle it the best way I knew how.

Fast forward, the students were given a chance to express their disappointment to what was supposed to be an equal party in leadership. Many of the leaders in the room were minorities as well but spent a lot of time silencing the concerns in the room. Immediately it clicked that justice wasn't the end goal but instead the line that we shouldn't dance on. I felt many eyes piercing me as they thought this would be a safe space to be transparent and I felt myself digging further into my seat. I wanted to disappear. I felt powerless as politics, power and business confidently took seat next to me. These were people I wanted to play with, these were people who determined my future and often mentors who would often but things into a business perspective for me. I began to think, am I willing to jeopardize my reputation to have a relationship with justice? Is this relationship something I would have to divorce? Or is this relationship what fuels my passion to help others?

As we exited the room, the students kept their heads down and shoulders low, more scared than they came in. Some navigated their way through their now spoiled environment and found

solutions that, despite their feelings, seemed to still work out for them. Others found their way out, and one started her own company, helping others succeed in STEM careers. I continue to find that balance in my own student development practices and have found a seat and a gateway to not only support justice and equity in education, but also mentor the potential leaders of tomorrow who struggle with justice and keeping their seat at the table. There will always be a hate and love relationship with justice and it's not up to me to divorce or marry it. It's up to me to recognize that it's a part of me that can't be undone.