There I was, standing in the center of my undergraduate course surrounded by twenty exceptional students. I was the Director of Community Relations, and a part-time instructor at Georgia Tech teaching a course that examined how race and poverty shape educational opportunities in distressed communities. As was customary, I posed the initial question, “Why are you in this course, why are you here!?"

An eager young white female student’s hand flew up first, “My name is Emily and I want to provide these black boys with something they will NEVER be able to repay me for...I want to SAVE them. She seemed thoroughly convinced that what she was saying was okay. I had never thought the students in the course would SAVE anyone. I mean a savior? Really? What in Heaven’s name made this girl think she could be anyone’s savior?

As the semester progressed, she continued echoing her savior sentiments, which eventually started to create underlying tension in the class. Though her tone seemed patronizing, I attempted to calm things by assuring the class she had good intentions, but I found that even I too was secretly bothered as
the discussion took me back to my childhood as one of those “black boys”. But hey, I didn’t have a savior or need saving!

My dad had been a jazz musician, his piano filling my life until 5th grade when he abruptly left. My mom and I relocated to Chicago where she labored to make ends meet, and I turned a latch key letting myself in after school, and following a daily routine to avoid danger. I did poorly in school and did my best to steer clear of the disciples street gang barely escaping their deviance and violence. As a breather, I travelled to Los Angeles each summer to stay with my aunt and uncle, where it was stable and safe. My cousin Chandra loved me in a way that made me feel significant and human, and that allowed me to exhale and have fun without fear. I cried each summer when I had to leave to return to spaces that lacked that same guidance and supervision.

The lack of structure eventually lead to me acting wildly, getting us evicted, and me being sent away to school at Western Illinois University. I remember the deadening silence as my estranged dad drove me there mumbling “good luck”, as he dropped me at the first sign indicated we were on WIU’s campus. He hurried me out of the car, handed me two crumpled $20’s, and drove off without saying goodbye. I remember standing surrounded by all my earthly belongings scared and crying. I
found a pay phone and placed a call to my cousin Chandra. Chandra calmed me with her confident assurances it would be okay.

At WIU, I banned with a small group of Black students to overcome feelings of isolation and exclusion. There, I eventually met Lynn, a first generation college student from Chicago who had endured so many traumas that my life seemed like a bed of roses. Lynn was a miracle who had bravely survived the circumstances of her birth and her past. She was louder than me, prouder than me, way smarter than me, and more confident than me. She was me - just a braver version - and being with her saved me from many of my doubts, fears and insecurities.

By the time we went home for Spring break, we were a solid couple with big dreams of what the future held, so when her younger sister Tee-Tee called the day before we were to return to school, it stopped time. “Lynn is dead. She was shot in the head earlier today.” I don’t remember much after that except Lynn appeared in my room that night and talked to me as if she were in the room. She assure me she was okay, that I too would be fine and then left before I could say good-bye. I wanted to say good-bye but she was gone.
Unable to make sense of life, I began acting out and getting in trouble every place I turned. I was eventually kicked out of school. I needed to feel, but didn’t know what to do with the feelings. I needed the world to know the pain was unbearable, so I found trouble everywhere I possible could.

My cousin Chandra eventually sent for me. She had moved to Atlanta to attend Clark-Atlanta University. When I pulled into her driveway, she ran and hugged me. She looking beyond my face into my soul. She held me and told me I would be okay, and I looked back at her until the reflection of my past hid behind the hope of my future. In that moment, I was rescued and saved from voices in my head, and began a journey of recapturing my identity.

When breast cancer intruded upon Chandra’s life, I acted strong for her but my heart broke into a million pieces. Through it all, she was a shining star. She continued wearing pretty scarves and cheering during football games. She even continued hosting her fabulous fish fry’s, laughing heartily, and being the center of our family’s joy. She was...Chandra.

During her services, when the choir sang “precious Lord, take my hand” I stood by her casket for what seemed like a lifetime. I wanted her to open her eyes so I could smile at her, and so she
could see what the face of a poor black boy looked like when he was saying farewell to his savior.