

"You Speak So Well"

By Joscelyn D. Cooper-Rodriguez

YOU SPEAK SO WELL...

Sounds nice, right? The words caress my floating ego until they are joined by white hands petting my brown face and hair, and I snap back into myself, remembering that I am an 18-year-old human being and I should speak well by now.

I say to myself "You are not a baby taking impressive first steps before one. You are not a parakeet with an impeccable mastery of the English language- YOU ARE 18!

I remember questioning if being capable of speaking well by your high school graduation was as basic an expectation as I had always assumed it to be. Not some extraordinary skill.

With every analyzation I sunk further into myself. Why couldn't she hear the principle say I graduated Summa Cum Laude, that I was accepted into 3 schools on academic scholarship? I wanted her to see more of me! But speaking well was all that I amounted too? A spectacle or anomaly if you will. My thoughts drudged up a familiar feeling that always led to me question, was I the only one who had higher expectations of me?

Me...

The concept of a "ME" has been elusive since the 4th grade. I so vividly remember standing in a circle at recess with girls singing "fly girl, say what, say what, say what" ready for my turn to show out. The end of the rhyme required each girl to choose a word that described them and bust a dance move. "That's why they call me..." most girls would say sexy, as if we knew anything about it at 9 or 10 years old. I said it too once or twice to be cool. Sometimes I would say "Bossy", or just use my nickname, "Jossie", all the while internally questioning if my word choices met their expectations each recess. Talk about pressure, having to identify and own what others call you when you barely know what to call yourself! but while these kinds of 4th grade "identity crisis" may have been normal, others were not, and their effects lingered for much longer.

Imagine being on honor roll every quarter in the 4th grade, bringing home gold stars and awards. Your mother thinks you are a super genius, so she sees no reason to hover when you do homework. But overtime she starts to realize you can't even read at a 4th grade level. That 4th grader was me! I was 9 coping with the fact that I had been identifying with a ME that was not real. I was not a smart over achiever. I was the product of a failing,

black, Cleveland Ohio school district that had zero expectations of me!

The following year I was fortunate enough to be accepted into a private school, but they expected me to struggle and insisted on holding me back from the 5th grade. I, however, couldn't let go of the expectations I had grown to have for myself, no matter how fraudulent they were. So, there I sat interviewing with my new principle at 10 years old, pleading my case to work hard and catch up. She was persuaded to let me continue into the 5th grade. Perhaps she was overcome by my ability to speak so well.

The sum of my experiences from 5th to 8th grade amounted to balancing the need to be liked in school, coming home to prove I was not my rebellious older sister and staying up until 2 am learning REAL math, all in an effort to beat the low expectations people had of me. I had been adapting to whatever the circumstances needed me to be and do for so long that the concept of ME was pretty dependent on others by age 14 preparing to enter high school.

At 15 I learned that expectations for friendship didn't transcend classrooms or cheerleading practices, because brown skin was not accepted into all white homes for hangouts. I learned that even those who looked most like me had an expectation of where I belonged. I guess I

betrayed my brown identity by trying to assimilate or as one girl put it "talking white". Another way of saying "you speak so well" I can't relate to you as a friend.

Like my various social groups who had trouble identifying and placing me, so did my academic advisors. At 16 I learned that even when you legitimately earn outstanding grades, someone's expectation of you can still hold you back. Despite excelling in my course work, I was placed in a tutoring study hall rather than advanced courses to fill my daily curriculum. It took several debates and the tutor proclaiming "she's wasting her time" to be moved into more appropriate course. The same scenario would play out in college freshman year when advocating to be placed in calculus 1 over basic algebra. "Why make things harder for yourself, I'll switch you, but this is on you" the dean said. I passed calculus 1 with 102% and made the dean's list that semester.

I can recall a plethora of scenarios just like this. One low expectation after the next, all instigated by and culminating in one penetrating phrase "You speak so well".

I've spent half my life trying to convince people to have higher expectations of me, and now as an adult in the professional world I wonder if they ever will. But those four words reverberate through me with every co-worker

comment about how I'm able to afford nice work clothes, devaluing task that supervisors only felt comfortable assigning to me or achievement of a new title that in some ways, carries no more weight or expectation than the one I started with entering the workforce.

To this day I question what is uniquely, me vs what I have portrayed myself to be out of protest or assimilation to others' expectations. But what I know for certain, I am determined, I will adapt and occasionally, yes, I do speak very well.