

Intro

I am not a racist.

Honestly though, what does that mean? It means that I have black friends right? My best friend has a white mom and a black dad. My children are taught to look beyond color and I am proud to say some of my daughter's friends are black.

I am not a racist.

I have stood up for my black peers and those in the news on race issues. I have fought with people of my own skin color, defending those who have been dealt injustice based on the color of their skin.

I am not a racist.

But what if I am? What if I am just as guilty as the white people I condemn for perpetuating the endless cycle of oppression, and I am so arrogant that I do not even see it?

This is my journey into uncovering the history of desegregation at Clemson University, learning more about the current state of race relations on campus, and discovering more about what I really feel on race in the process.

The Beginning

I think it is important to start at the beginning when you are attempting to analyze who you are. Some of my first memories are of the government apartments in Columbia, South Carolina. I was four years old and it was the early 80's. My mom lived there because it was what she could afford. I had lots of friends I played with on a regular basis. One of my mom's good friends, Jesse, lived a few apartments down and I adored her. She was so nice to me. Her apartment always smelled wonderful, like good southern home cooked food. My world seemed perfect and I was happy.

I do not know the circumstances surrounding how I ended up with my grandparents, but at the age of five, I was officially living with them. My first day of school I walked into the classroom and everything felt wrong. I looked around and saw nothing but white kids. It was the first time in my life that I noticed race. It dawned on me that all of the people I had grown up with did not look like me. These children looked like me, but they felt absolutely unfamiliar.

At home I lived with grandparents that came from a very different world. They had lived in a time of segregation and lynching. They had spent their whole lives justifying racism with scripture and telling me, "God forbids races from mixing." They would ramble endlessly about the Tower of Babel being proof. It wasn't until I was older and read the scripture on my own

that I realized how badly they had twisted the words. I heard the word nigger repeatedly and it was always said with such a disgusted tone that it made me cringe. The rest of the family spoke the same way. I could not comprehend their feelings of hate. None of my friends or my mom's friends were anything like the rest of my family portrayed black people to be. I kept silent on how I felt because those who seemed to sympathize with blacks were referred to as nigger lovers. Based on the way it was said, it was obviously the vilest thing you could be.

Just before my ninth birthday, my grandparents sold their house in Columbia and we moved to Lancaster, South Carolina. I had been in a predominantly white school in Columbia; I only saw 3 black students in my four years there. Moving to Lancaster and back into a school where there were many black students was a culture shock. This move also followed four years of racist brainwashing by my grandparents and extended family, so when I went into the classroom, I was afraid.

Being a new kid was hard. Being a new kid that was obese was even harder. I was not received well by my white peers and quite often was the butt of their hateful jokes. The black students did not treat me that way, however. They were friendly and helpful. When we would stand in line for lunch, the black girls in my class would stand behind me and play with my hair. The black kids and white kids in my school were different, but I found the preaching of my family to contradict what I was actually experiencing in the classroom. Still, I was afraid.

By the time I was in high school, my grandparents had passed away and I was living in Upstate South Carolina with my mom. I would say the majority of my friends were white and I did not really know how to relate to the black students in my classes. I was an "emo" kid and listened to rock and heavy metal. I assumed all black kids listened to rap. It just wasn't my personal taste in music and since we dressed different and listened to different music, we couldn't possibly have anything in common. There was a guy in a few of my classes. I really liked him and would always sit near him. Our conversations flowed well and he made me smile. We would cut up in class and I would sit behind him putting twists and braids into his hair. I wanted to ask him out but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was still living in a world where every white person I came across called white girls that dated black men "N~N~ lovers". There was that word again, and it was said with such disgust that it must be a truly awful thing. I also felt like dating a black guy would bring condemnation on my family from the white community. I never told him how I felt. I was still afraid.

The Evolution of Being an Adult

Eventually we grow up and we go out on our own. It was at the age of eighteen that I learned about the LGBT movement. Instantly I was on board. I could not understand why anyone would have an issue with two people in love. I knew my sexual orientation and did not have to be a member of the LGBT community to fight for their cause. It was simply the right thing to do. I went to a pride parade in Atlanta during 1997 with some friends to support them and their ability to love and not be treated differently in the workplace. We walked through the streets

chanting many things while people dressed in black robes like the grim reaper stood on the side of the road telling us we would burn in hell. One of the chants we said stood out to me in particular, and to this day it echoes in my head.

“Gay, Straight, Black, White. Same struggle, same fight!”

I had never thought about it in that way but wasn't it all about equal rights? Does not every individual on this earth deserve the same chance at love, pay, and happiness? But the black community had already won their battle: segregation was a thing of the past, blacks could vote, go to college, and affirmative action had guaranteed equal representation in the work force. Now I needed to make sure that the LGBT community won the same war. On with my crusade I went. We all deserve equality after all.

In my middle twenties, I decided to pick up and move on a whim. I had just gone through a rough break up and after spending my entire life in the south east, I was ready for a change. This was to be an adventure. I moved to a little town called Yelm in Washington State and took a job at the local Rite Aid. I lived at the base of Mount Rainier and walking out my front door, it was all I could see. It had not dawned on me yet that there was something missing from the landscape. After a couple of months in Yelm, I decided to move to Aberdeen, Washington. It was a small town but big enough for the older style Walmart that did not have a grocery and closed every night at 10pm. I took a job at that Walmart because there really was nowhere else to work without a college education.

My first day on the job, it finally dawned on me what had been missing. I had not seen a black individual in almost two months. Working as a cashier in this small town was where I saw my first black person. I literally did a double take. She and I began to talk and she was absolutely fascinated with what life was like for blacks in the southeast. She wanted to know if it was really as racist as she had always been told and what would the “blacks back home think” if they met her. I remember in an interview Oprah did years ago, she talked about how the black community told her she acted too white. That is what this girl reminded me of. There was no accent or Ebonic slang to her voice. She sounded like every other individual in the Pacific North West. She finally settled on the fact that black individuals from South Carolina would never accept her. This was the first time the expression “a white black person” was ever put into my vocabulary.

A few trips to Seattle with friends showed me that there were other black people in Washington State. But the one thing that still felt absent was the magnitude of racism I witnessed in the South East. I can remember calling my mom back in South Carolina and exclaiming over the phone, “I love this place! There are no racist people! It is so different from South Carolina. Why can't people back home act like this?” My mom said it was probably because the Pacific North West did not have the long history of slavery and deep-seated hatred that people in the South had. There may have been truth to that. The longer I lived there, the more I saw that racism did exist. However, it was often between whites and people of the Hispanic culture or the Native Americans that called Washington their home.

Back in the South

Eventually, I moved back to South Carolina. I had grown up seeing racism, but I had not really seen the scope of it. It was not until I had been removed from southern culture—which seems to embrace it in a backdoor sort of way, pretending it doesn't exist while it seeps from hushed whispers—that I could truly see how rampant it remains in the South.

I found that when a group of white individuals would get together, things would be said that made my ears feel as though they were being hit with fiery tongues. My heart ached at how people could pass such judgment on another because of the color of their skin. These things had never been so blatantly obvious to me until they were removed from my life.

“Damn nigger at work. He is such a lazy person. I swear to god, all of them think we owe them something and since they spent so much time in fields working as slaves, think they don't have to do a damn thing now.”

My heart would scream, “Could you please not use that word? It's such a hate filled word!” In the times I was brave enough to speak up, the typical response would be,

“I'm not racist and I'll call a white person that same damn word if he acts like that. A nigger is a nigger and it doesn't have anything to do with the color of your skin.”

The more I pushed, the bigger their defensive wall would become. I transferred into Clemson to Study Wildlife and Fisheries Biology. Clemson offers classes called creative inquiry that can allow you to gain real world experience in topics that fit in your field, or a chance to explore other career options just in case what you are currently doing does not feel like the right path. While looking for a Creative Inquiry project to help improve my lab skills or animal biology knowledge, I came across a project by Dr. Rhondda Thomas called, “The Clemson University Story.” It was a chance for students to conduct research and provide documentation about Clemson's history. This included unearthing all of the important people that brought Clemson together: the minorities that were never mentioned but played a huge role in the college's beginnings, the musicians that played on campus, the first females, the first African Americans, the first international students and much more. Something about this project spoke to me. It felt like an opportunity to for me to really understand the struggle of minorities in America. How else could I be an ally for them if I did not understand what I was fighting for? I joined creative inquiry and after an interview, it was decided that my research would be about the integration of Clemson University.

In the beginning, it will be my week-by-week journey. By the end of my story, it will be about my personal journey and where I stand on race relations in America today.

Week One

My first week of research involved going through articles sent to me by Dr. Thomas. For those that don't know, Harvey Gantt was the first black student at Clemson University. He transferred in after winning a court case against the school in 1963. While integration around the country was happening, quite often it was marred by violence and protest. The integration of Clemson University was in contrast to that, something that Clemson prides itself on. Since the story of Harvey Gantt had been told many times already, I was not sure how much more could be unearthed.

I sat and thought for a while on which direction to go with my research. I remembered Dr. Thomas telling me about the great effort put into making sure Harvey Gantt was peacefully brought into the school. I began to wonder about all of those first people who came after him in this journey. While Harvey Gantt had armed guards and there was a huge support system for him within the community, the people who followed in his footsteps did not have the same initial protections and after the spotlight had faded, the community may not have offered them the same help Mr. Gantt had been given.

I decided that the best place for me to begin my search for these individuals was the TAPS yearbook starting in 1963, the year that Mr. Gantt won his right to attend Clemson University. I searched through every page between the years 1963 and 1966, looking for any student or faculty that were present at Clemson University. I did not find very many students in 1963 through 1965, but I did find a black member of the Clemson staff.

Mr. McGee was a tenured member of the athletic department at Clemson for 46 years. He became a part of Clemson when he was around six years old, helping his stepfather clean up the fields. When his stepfather passed away, he was hired in an official capacity in 1934 at the age of sixteen. He stood out in a world where black individuals did not have much presence. The fact that students and coaches respected and loved him showed me that we can live where the color of one's skin does not have to dictate a person's existence. He stayed with Clemson until the end of his life and to this day, those who knew him remember him fondly.

This prompted me to search Google for "The first African American Staff at Clemson University." While it did not result in any names, it did pull up a more recent study done on diversity at Clemson University by a task force put together through the college. It seems that even 52 years after Mr. Gantt won his landmark case, Clemson still suffers from a lack of diversity, with only 6% of the student population being black.

I have to admit, the lack of diversity at Clemson is blatantly obvious to me. The first time I noticed it was when I went to the cafeteria on campus. I walked around and saw hundreds of white students, and would see one single table with maybe 5-8 black students by themselves. I couldn't understand why they would continue to segregate intentionally. Wasn't that counterproductive? I filed that question away as something to ask along the way.

Week Two

Week two found me in the 1968 TAPS yearbook in hopes of finding more early players of the integration movement. I found myself quite frustrated going through the first four TAPS yearbooks because the photos of black individuals were few and far between. Each black student felt like a gem waiting to be uncovered and every face brought a small surge of joy. Going through the 1968 TAPS, the number of black individuals at Clemson began to increase, as did my excitement that things were finally progressing. In the mid 1960's, Clemson opened extension campuses across South Carolina. Enrollment went from ten to thirty-two black individuals between campuses, with most coming from the Sumter campus.

Something that bothered me as I had gone through previous TAPS yearbooks was the number of black students that would start at Clemson, only to vanish before senior year. I know that student retention is an issue across races, but I wondered if the reason this happened for black students could be related to the treatment they received at school. Thankfully, in 1968, there were several repeat faces and I hoped that my continued research would allow me the privilege of watching them graduate.

As I began looking at external sources for black alumni I had found in TAPS, I discovered that several had passed recently due to age related health issues and one was lost to war. The death of these individuals meant one less story that could be told; one less moment in time for future generations to learn from. In the words of George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." By losing the stories of those who have gone through the civil rights movement, such racial atrocities can be repeated. Maybe today these issues are not as blatantly obvious, but they do still exist. I think some of the white population of America often feels like they have corrected the injustices of the past, paid their reparations, and it is time to move on. Even those who won't openly say it think it. It's hard for me to hear people of my own ethnicity say these things. I try so hard to remind them that these events were not something that happened hundreds of years ago. The people who lived through these events are still alive today. Their story is still real and raw. When they sit around the dinner table with their families, they are telling their children and grandchildren about the things they went through. It is those children and grandchildren that are going out as members of society, angry for what the white population has done to their loved ones. I'm angry for them.

Week Three

As I looked through the pages of 1969 TAPS, I discovered more members of the black student body joining the various student organizations on the Clemson University campus. James Bostic was part of the Phi Psi fraternity, Aaron Harvey joined the young democrats, D. Kimes joined angel flight and there were African American students in the Clemson players, the Glee club, on the TAPS junior staff, and in the Baptist student union.

I wondered how the organizations treated their new black members and if all the white members were on board and accepting of their new black members. I hope these are stories

that can be told by the players involved. I would love to have them speak with members of the Clemson Story Project to ensure their stories are not lost.

I located a page in the 1969 TAPS that literally made my heart sink.

A picture of a KKK cross burning is in the Clemson University yearbook and pasted beside the picture is a black man breakdancing. The poem accompanying the pictures reads:

Red, white and white.
Good cross burning.
Good flag carrying.
Good date.
Different strokes for different folks.
We remember; the U.S.A. is good.

I find the KKK organization and activities repulsive. Members of the KKK claim that their activities are not about hate. They tout their good deeds as proof of this, but when you believe that your race is somehow purer and more elite simply because of the color of your skin, hair and eyes, you do not understand the concept of hate. It's hard for me to understand how this was an acceptable image to be on the pages of a yearbook in 1969, but especially when it is being portrayed in such a nonchalant fashion. It hurts me to see images like this on the pages of a book my school produced. But I can only imagine how it made the black students feel. I wonder if this was so commonplace, that the black population was desensitized to it all. It is so absolutely wrong.

One of the black students I found in the yearbook, Dr. James E. Bostic, had a huge presence across campus. He put himself into white dominated organizations and made his mark. He was the first black man to earn his PhD from Clemson. After he left our school, he continued to achieve great things in life. I found myself smiling as I read the various biographies about Dr. Bostic. He was a man who rose up against the adversity and prejudice that was present in the 1960's. He did not allow his experiences in life or school, whether good or bad, hold him back.

Week Four

Week four saw me going through the 1970 TAPS yearbook in search of more black alumni. As soon as I opened the yearbook, it was obvious I had hit the 70's. I was assaulted with techno color, bellbottoms and big hair. One of the things I almost missed in the book because of the bright colors hiding the words was one of the intro pages. On the left, you had an image of black men, and on the right was the image of a car driving away. The title to the left was Black and the title to the right was White.

The poem Black said:

Black is black, and accordin to the Bible
But the Bible ain't always right.

They didn't:
Burn the flag
Get rid of our song
Or rape our women
Or marry our sisters
Or get any of their demands

Keep worrying Honkeee
They got one on the team
They'll be back next year

I tried to read it with an objective mind. I couldn't understand what message was being conveyed. To me, it felt like projected hate and anger. I do not know who wrote this poem, or if it was a true reflection of the black community within Clemson. It hurt me to read the words. It was a shocking use of words and felt threatening. If my grandfather has not so often used the word honkee growing up, I probably would not have understood what it is referencing. I see the word honkee as a derogatory remark aimed at white individuals, like the way my extended family use the word nigger when I was growing up. I do not like the way either word makes me feel.

The poem on the opposing page was called White. Its words said:

White is beautiful, too at times.....

Dear DAD STOP YOU SAID ALL
COLORED FOLK WAS STUPID STOP
BUT ONE GOT AN "A" IN
ENGLISH 101 STOP AND I GOT
A "D" STOP COMMER SPLICES
AND SPELLIN STOP STOP STOP

DEAR DAD STOP I FOUND THIS
AT WESTERN UNION
STOP WE AREN'T ALL LIKE THAT
ARE WE? STOP

To me, this poem reflected the stereotypes passed on to future white generations. This is one of the biggest perpetrators of hate and ignorance. We are born seeing each other as humans, not black versus white versus Asian, versus any other race. The ideas we carry about people based on the color of their skin come from those around us in our childhood. This man had come to college with preconceived notions that black people were stupid. It was that same type

of brainwashing I had endured growing up. For me, coming to school and witnessing that the black students were not what I had been told was eye opening. Even so, it was hard to let go of those thoughts and internal feelings. What we see and what we are told is so contradictory, yet because we look up to those that raise and nurture us, it is hard to admit they are wrong.

I began looking up Clemson Alumni with names that stood out. I discovered two of them had already passed away, lost to the Vietnam war. These types of searches were so hard for me. To know that these people were gone, their stories lost, made my heart ache. Bura H. Beck, a man from 1970, with his cool shades on, gave his life in battle for a country that still did not respect the man he was. He walked on our very campus, and now only his ghost remains. So many times when you look at the history of war in America, black members of our society proudly fought, often giving up their own life, when so many people of in white society gave them no respect. Why did they continue to fight? How could they be proud of a country that had served them so many injustices? I don't know that I could.

This week, I mourned the deaths of people I have never met. This week, I walked with the ghost of Clemson Alumni on campus.

Week Five

This week's research was in TAPS 1971 and 1972. In 1971 there were a lot more black women joining the Clemson student body. Up until this point, the presence of black women had been a slow progression so it was most definitely something I was glad to see. Some of the individuals I first found in TAPS are now in their senior years. To know that no matter the journey, positive or negative, they have succeeded in accomplishing their dreams was a satisfying moment in my research. I continued to look for information on past alumni. It seems a great deal of those who have come into Clemson and continued all the way through have done big things in their life. I can only begin to imagine the strength and the determination these people had.

In 1972 I noticed black students participating in other areas of the college, such as sports and military, but I was unable to identify them because no names were listed. I used Google in hopes of finding the first black athletes at Clemson University. The only athlete I managed to locate was Marion Reeves. The article said he started at Clemson in 1971. How had I missed him when going through the 1971 yearbook? I went backwards thinking I could find him but I saw him nowhere. I looked through the student section of 1972 again and I still did not see him. As I was going through the sports section, near the end of TAPS 1972, I finally spotted him by the number on the back of his jersey. It was not a face shot, and if I did not know his number, I would not have known it was him. I found more on Marion Reeves through the Anderson Independent Newspaper. You can read the article here:

<http://www.independentmail.com/news/clemsonsfirstblackfootballplayerhasspentlif etime-layingfoundationsep413825380349554341.html>

Week Six

This week I met with Corrine Grant at the Clemson student alumni center. We spent a lot of time discussing the goal of the CU story project, as well as the research I have done so far. I learned that a project similar to the one I was currently working on was started years earlier, but ceased due to lack of funding. The Strom Thurmond Institute on Clemson campus holds the work that was completed. It can be found by searching for the work titled, "Documenting the African American Experience."

The most interesting story I learned this week was about Craig Mobley. When most people think about the first African American athlete at Clemson, usually Marion Reeves comes to mind. However, as I went through the TAPS yearbook, I noticed other black athletes. Mrs. Grant told me that Craig Mobley was the first scholarship black athlete at Clemson, yet I had no idea who he was. Dr. Bostic, already a graduate, and a local, Dr. Aamon Martin, went to Craig Mobley's house to convince his mom that he would be safe at Clemson. It was with their persuasion that he became Clemson's first scholarship athlete. I thought about Craig Mobley's mother, the mixture of pride and fear she must have felt sending her son to Clemson University. As I researched Craig Mobley's name, I found an online article about him. It came from the previous work, "Documenting the African American Experience," and talked about his time at Clemson University. Mr. Mobley did experience some passive aggressive racially motivated behavior during his time at Clemson. He played under his basketball scholarship for one year before leaving basketball to focus on his engineering degree.

The alumni from 1963-1995 seemed to be happy with their time at Clemson and proud to be associated with the college. In general, they hold a strong respect towards Clemson and what impact their time on campus has had in their life. In 1995, there was a shift in the black student body. Some of the students were not happy with the state of the school and alumni association. I could only surmise that the political climate of America at the time might be what is fueling the feelings of these black alumni. Whatever was going on, they felt so strongly about it that instead of participating in the Black Student Alumni Association, they created their own, "Black Graduates of Clemson," and pulled away from the traditional organizations within Clemson. This organization eventually disbanded and reabsorbed back into the Clemson Black Alumni but it left me with question about what was going on in 1995 for this to have happened to begin with.

Week Seven

Clemson has what is known as the original band of brothers. Most of those who came through Clemson from the time of integration up until about 1970, formed their own special bond and group dynamic. These first black students shared the same experiences; coming through the halls during a time where their presence seemed alien.

I was still pondering the breakaway of black alumni in 1995 and decided to search for current events of that year. Looking through news publications, I noticed that in October of 1995, an event called the Million Man March occurred at the White House. Over half a million black men descended on white house grounds in a show of strength and numbers to protest the current state of African American men in America. Could this possibly be connected? While I was reading about the Million Man March, I received an email that the anniversary was approaching and Clemson was holding a dinner discussion about this very topic.

Dinner with 12 Strangers: 20 Years after the March.
The State of Black Men in America.

“Join your fellow peers in a riveting discussion about the current state of Black men in American while reflecting upon the series of events that culminated in the Million Man March as we approach its 20th year anniversary. Was the march in vain? Do we have new reasons to march? Could we get a million men to march today? Get to meet new people, enjoy a meal and discuss current trends and topics impacting our society.”

This email felt like a calling. For me to be researching the Million-Man March and then receive an invitation to attend a dinner commemorating the event could not be a coincidence. I reserved a spot and was told to formulate a question and submit it, along with what I hoped to take away from this event. I wrote, "Do you think that the Million Man March had any sort of impact on the motivations, aspirations and emotional states of students on college campuses across America? I hope to take away from this experience a greater understanding of whether social uprisings bring about true lasting change." I began to feel scared.

Week Eight

This week I met with the graduate teaching assistant Emily and we discussed the upcoming final project. My work was done as a directed studies class while the majority of the students in the project worked in a traditional group setting. The traditional class would be doing a website that contained all of their research, and I had the option to join them or do my own essay to discuss my findings this semester. I opted for the writing project because I felt like it would be easier to convey my journey. The next step is figuring out what my writing will be about. Should I be discussing the individual people and creating short biographies on each, or should this essay be more about my own personal discoveries and feelings through the semester? I think it should be a little of both.

I completed my search through the 1973 TAPS this week, pulling out any new faces that I had not previously seen. There seems to have been a leveling off in the numbers of black students entering Clemson.

Week Nine

I continued my research in TAPS and decided that at this point that the best method for finding students was to only record the seniors for that particular year. So many students came into Clemson but never graduated, so it may be easier to focus on the ones that did.

This class has been a learning experience for me: not only on an academic level, but also on a personal level. I have had to dig deep about my own beliefs concerning race and what it means to be a black individual in America. I have always attempted to sympathize with minorities of all types because I believed the struggle they have had is real. It is one thing to believe in an idea, but completely different when you hear the stories told. For those who came into Clemson in the beginning, the ones who broke the racial barrier, they showed more strength than the majority will ever have to possess in an entire lifetime.

This week I put my focus into Clemson TAPS 1974. In the previous yearbooks, I would always see members of the black student body within the different fraternities at Clemson. This year I realized that the fraternities were void of black individuals. At first I couldn't understand what had happened. On page 246 I saw the fraternity Omega Psi Phi. It was six black men in a fraternity of their own. They called themselves "the brothers" and their agenda was to bring about a union of college men with similar high ideals of scholarship and manhood in order to stimulate the attainment of set goals. This was the first time I noticed the purposeful separation of black individuals from the general populace. As before, I could not help but wonder if this was counterproductive to the goal of desegregation. I'm finding it hard to understand the black mentality and certain choices that are made.

This week is my dinner at Clemson for the Million Man March discussion. I do not know if anything will come of it that will help me in my research for this class, but I hope it will be both educational and enlightening nonetheless. This is an intimate event between 12 students and a group leader that will be about an event that happened 20 years ago. It was an event about black men in America. One of the articles I read earlier in the semester talked about being the pepper in the salt shaker on Clemson campus, referring to the paltry amount of black representation on campus. What if I will be the salt in the peppershaker? What if I am the only white individual there? What if I am the only white female there? I'm scared.