



GUILFORD EDUCATION ALLIANCE



Lift Every Voice: Blake Odum

Our "Lift Every Voice" series has been eye-opening, affirming and powerful for me and others based on the feedback we've received from readers. This edition's contributor is Blake Odum, a native of Flint, MI, who lives with his wife Olivia, a proud Bennett Belle, in Greensboro. He currently serves as the Youth Development Coordinator for Vandalia Elementary School, is a Commissioner for the City of Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department, and is a member of GEA's Program Leadership Team. Blake is also a candidate for the Guilford County Board of Education.

When Blake was just 19 years old, he responded to a call from Olivia, then a high school senior, asking him to help take some of her classmates on a college tour. A college student himself, he cobbled together resources to rent a van and make the tour happen. In the 10 years since, Blake's nonprofit, the Motivational Foundation, has taken nearly 1000 high school students on annual bus tours to visit HBCU campuses across the country. Blake and Olivia travel with the students and have helped them change the trajectory of their lives. Sticking with the students matters because Blake learned early the dangers a Black child faces

when they "wander off" or "drift off alone." Please take a moment to read below and hear Blake's voice.

-- *Winston*

The Talk

By: Blake Odum

Every young black boy reaches a point in life when he has to have "the talk".

It is almost like a rite of passage in the black community. Though this conversation does encompass safety measures, it is not a conversation about the "birds and the bees" or sexual protection. Not that "talk".

This is a different kind of "talk".

It is actually a conversation about how gruesome and vile our society can be to someone simply because of their skin color. From a safety standpoint, this conversation is often entangled with how to interact with law enforcement when encountered in order to make it home alive.

I imagine the day that a parent has to have this conversation is the day their heart breaks.

This was my reality as a poor black kid growing up on the north side of Flint, MI.

For me, I had to be about eight or nine years old. I was in Clanton, AL at the time. We were in a Piggly Wiggly store getting some items to cook for dinner. It was the summertime. We drove to Clanton, as it was the closest town to my Big Momma's (great-grandmother's) house. She lived in rural Verbena, AL. While shopping, I had to use the restroom. I told my mother and my grandmother that I had to use the restroom. But occupied with a quick grocery visit, my request went ignored. My stomach was rumbling. I drifted off from my family and found the restroom in the back of the store by myself. Relieved, at last!

When I came out of the restroom, the store was almost on a lock-down. Everyone was looking for me. My grandmother, mother, and the store employee were only seconds away from calling the police. I remember my grandmother standing at one of the counters or at a cash register, in sheer panic. When we got into the car, I could not really understand what I had done that was so wrong. What did I do to cause everyone to be so upset? I simply had to use the restroom, and I went! I took initiative. I was being independent and all of those other things that we want our children to be. Where's the problem?

It was then, when my mother and grandmother explained to me who Emmett Till was, and shared his heart-wrenching story. Emmett Till was 14 years old when he was murdered on August 28, 1955.

My grandmother, in tears, said that she thought something like that had happened to me. I remember them telling me - we are in Alabama, not Michigan. You are black. People do things that are very harmful to Black people.

"You can't just wander off", my grandmother said.

At that time, I just couldn't wrap my head around it. However, I never forgot that situation and I never forgot the conversation that we had in that car on our way back to Verbena. And I never drifted off alone again.

That was my introductory conversation on being black.

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