



LET'S TALK equality

Concessions by David K.

I will be the first one to say that I am extremely privileged. No matter what bad situation I currently face, it does not even compare to the atrocities ninety percent of the world face. However, I am only aware of my privilege due to the fact that I grew up in a household that taught me the value of my surroundings and how easily they can be taken away. My parents immigrated from a country where persecution and insensitive behavior ran rampant. They were underprivileged and the underdogs in every sense of the word. My parents taught me to recognize all the factors that make me privileged and advocate for those people that still need help.

Both my mother and father grew up in Russia, to respectable families, yet because they were Jewish, they never received the same respect and privilege as their non-Jewish neighbors. From a very young age my mother always wanted to be a doctor, yet due to the anti-Semitism within admissions departments in medical schools my grandfather was forced to pay a bribe. My mother would later tell me that a woman refused my mother's help on the sole fact that she was Jewish. My father fell into a similar situation because he wanted to study engineering. He was forced to commute three hours everyday to his university because it was the only school that would accept Jews. This was a bleak reality for many Jewish people in Russia during that time. My parents realized that this anti-Semitism would not subside because it was a deeply rooted societal problem that no one had the desire to fix. Therefore, my parents immigrated to the United States in 1987, hoping to find the sense of humility missing in Russia. When they arrived in America they had a total of a hundred and fifty dollars and the knowledge that no matter how bad things got they would never settle and they would never return to Russia. Ten years later they were living the "American Dream." It was a mindset of hard work and dedication that allowed my parents to never give up and prosper in America.

The most important lesson my parents taught my sister and me was that education was key. They said that knowledge is something no one can ever take away from you. I have taken those words to heart and never looked back. It is with that mentality that I am in school today. Because of my privilege I was able to attend a well-rounded private school and be in an environment with some of the smartest individuals in the country. However, I cannot say that I maximized my privilege completely throughout high school. If I did not receive an A in all of my classes, I felt as if I failed. Then I felt as if I had failed myself and my parents, I began to feel severely depressed. Additionally, I felt as though I was in constant competition with my peers. As I reflect on my time in high school, I felt that in order to truly appreciate my privilege, I had to set unreasonably high standards for myself that gave way to my depression. Eventually I realized that working hard and receiving good grades was enough to prove that I appreciated the opportunities given to me. Yet throughout this bleak cycle I found that in order to be able

to succeed one must be happy with one's self. Once I changed my mindset to be happy yet ambitious, I was able to utilize my privilege in constructive and selfless ways.

When I received my drivers license I began to volunteer a lot. To this day, choosing to volunteer my time to many organizations has been one my best decisions. Specifically one experience stands out from all the rest. During the summer of my Senior year I began to teach young children tennis that lived in rough communities. This was such a meaningful experience because I often associated tennis as a wealthy sport, yet there I was. It was the first time in my life that I actually saw literal proof of the privilege I had. I had lived in such a sheltered environment, I never could have imagined how many people live in poverty. It was amazing how grateful those children were for things I completely took for granted. As the summer progressed I began to realize that simple necessities such fruits and vegetables were completely out of the reach for people living in the community. However, what I did see were an ample supply of pawn stores and high interest loan offices. It was these very businesses that were causing many individuals to fall into this cycle of poverty. It made me sick to my stomach that these businesses thrived on the misfortunes of others. Towards the end of the summer I had realized what I would use my privilege for. With my privilege I want to help low-income communities break their cycles of poverty like I had broken my cycle of depression. I hope to one day earn the trust of the people from these communities and help them eventually thrive.

Privilege can be a curse or a blessing, depending on how one uses it. Privilege can be harmful if one does not realize the opportunities one has been blessed with. However, if one can simply acknowledge the privilege one has and help others reach that same privilege the world would be a much better place. I'm afraid that if I had not grown up in my family I would have never realized my own privilege and the need to help others around me. I'm afraid to say that many college students in this country, ours included, have no idea the privilege they haven been given. However, I have faith that one day people will come to their senses and no longer hoard all the wealth.

Let's Talk Equality is an initiative by a group of University of Tampa professors to engage students in conversations about privilege, bias and social justice. For more information, visit www.letstalkequality.com or on Twitter @ltequality.