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Girl Talk: How A Student Schooled Me On Racism

Tamara Lynch 12:00PM, 02/15/2011

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A few years ago my friend Dana and I were volunteers for Minds Matter, a non-profit organization that helps underprivileged kids get into college. Dana, a white Florida hippie who had a thing for rap music, was hoping to boost her resume in order to secure a teaching fellowship in the city. My goal as a biracial fashion executive was just to help underprivileged minority girls get into college. The program was amazing. Every Saturday. Dana and I, along with a hundred other

mentors would devote hours to our mentees and help them identify the schools best suited for them, complete their applications, and draft their personal essays. My mentee was a beautiful African American high school senior from Harlem named Jaleesa. She was smart, hardworking, and respectful, and I had come to view her like a little sister. To know that I was helping this young and talented girl into to college made me really proud, and protective.

Although there was a lot of work, there was a lot of fun too. After the mentees went home, the mentors would gather at a local bar and get to know each other. It was a great way to meet guys, whom Dana did; a blonde blue eyed Boston native named Brendan who was secretly called the "Brad Pitt" of Minds Matter. It wasn't a love match, but they became close friends, and by default, I became close friends with Brendan too.

One afternoon, Jaleesa and I ordered a pizza for lunch while I helped her structure one of her application essays. Since it was just the two of us there were slices left, and I called several mentors over, including Brendan, to eat some.

"Thanks, 'T-Nizzle," Brendan said to me as he poked his hand into the box.

Jaleesa's back stiffened and her eyes widened in disbelief. Unaware, Brendan walked away while stuffing a slice in his mouth.

"I can't believe he just said that!" Jaleesa said.

"I know, look, he doesn't know what he's saying," I soothed, "I'll talk to him."

As I walked across the room to find Brendan, my head swam with what to say. I knew he didn't mean it, and I also knew where he heard it. Dana, the least racist person in the world, had a habit of calling me "T-Nizzle" because she loved Snoop Dogg. I never took it the wrong way because it was never meant in any way other than fun. "For sheezy" and "for shizzle my nizzle" were always popping out of her mouth, and to hear it from a white, hippie girl from Florida was kinda funny. But the closer I got to Brendan, the more I realized that I could have avoided this whole thing had I just told Dana to lay off the Snoop impressions a long time ago. It never



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bothered me before, but seeing Jaleesa's reaction gave this whole thing new meaning.

"B," I said when I found Brendan, "I need to talk to you."

"Hey!" he said. "Thanks again for the pizza. What's up?"

"Look, you can't call me 'T-Nizzle,' not in front of Jaleesa," I said. "Actually just don't say it period."

"Why not?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

"Well you know what it means," I said. "I know you didn't mean anything by it, but Jaleesa got really upset."

"Wait, what does it mean?" Brendan asked, looking confused.

Is he serious? I thought. "Brendan, 'nizzle' means 'ni**er.'"

"What?" Brendan's blue eyes got as big as dinner plates. "Tamara, I would never call you that!"

"I know that," I assured him, "but in Jaleesa's eyes, you just did."

"But Dana calls you that all the time!"

"Dana thinks she is Snoop Dogg!" I exclaimed. "Back up a minute, what did you think it meant?"

"I didn't think it meant anything!" Brendan explained, a little dumbfounded.

"Well, what do you think 'for shizzle my nizzle' means?" I asked.

"I don't know..." Brendan's voice trailed off. "What does it mean?"

"It means 'for sure my nigga."

I thought Brendan's head was going to explode. His reddened face got redder with each heartfelt apology.

Jaleesa's arms were crossed over her chest when I made my way back to the table.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He apologized," I said, sitting back down. "He didn't know what it meant. Truly."

"How could he not know?" Jalessa said, her eyebrows shooting up. "That's just ignorant."

"Sometimes people hear things on the radio or on television and repeat it without thought," I explained. "You know how many people are out there singing songs without knowing their true meaning? I was 10 when I was singing Cyndi Lauper's 'She Bop,' and it was about masturbation!"

"Who's Cyndi Lauper?"

"Nevermind," I sighed. "All I'm saying is it was an innocent mistake. Nobody told him it was wrong. He'll never do it again."

"Well, okay," Jaleesa said. "I'm glad he apologized, but people should know what they're saying." She uncrossed her arms and visibly relaxed.

"You're right. Absolutely," I nodded, thinking she would be a good teacher one day. "Now let's get your essay in shape so you can send it out."

Schooling Brendan on race relations was not on my agenda that day, but looking back now, I'm glad I did. His actions, however innocent, were hurtful to another, and counteractive to the racial divide we are constantly trying to close. Brendan has several black friends today, which I will take credit for, since he is no longer throwing around the word "nizzle." As for Dana, after hearing what happened with Brendan, she decided on her own to stop saying it too, although her love of Snoop has never waivered. Ironically, Jaleesa took her smart self to Boston University, where I assume she is schooling other Bostonians like Brendan. Since then I've become pro-active in pointing things out to friends who "don't get it" and it really makes life easier on everyone. My spiel goes something like this, "unless you are a rapper, are black, or from 'da hood,' DON'T SAY IT."

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