

AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN JOURNEY IN RECOVERY

By Frederick Shegog, Founder/CEO, [The Message LLC](#)

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Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and Ahmaud Arbery all share a common bond, they are representative of the unaddressed systemic racial inequality in our society. These are all African American people whose lives were taken by the very people sworn to protect and serve. I am a citizen in this system, but also a person in recovery from substance abuse disorder and mental illness. For years the healthcare system and, in particular, mental health/substance use disorder funding disproportionately affected people of color. Being both African-American and in recovery, I now understand what Langston Hughes meant in his poem "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943." Hughes stated, "How long I got to fight both HITLER AND JIM CROW."

By default, I am a very optimistic person. In large part, because of my Christian upbringing, it leads me to focus on soul and character rather than pigment of skin. However, my beliefs and lifestyle are not a symbol of what America has allowed for generations. I continue to hear that racial injustices will be eradicated with the next generation, because there are just a few bad apples left. Regularly I hear, "Freddy, you see that Obama was elected. See, this country has truly changed. We are not racist like we used to be." I wanted to believe that myself; however, I find myself typing this while watching buildings burn from racial pain as a result of peaceful protests turned sour due to police militarization. I see peaceful protesters being tear-gassed in front of the White House. I see another African American family crying out to America for help because they now must bury their loved one. I see another African American daughter who will be without her father. I stopped pondering the ideals of a few bad apples left and realized the reality. Think of it. If you have a freshly picked basket of fruit, you will check to make sure they are all good. How many rotten fruits do you have to find before you throw the whole bushel away? America, it is time to wake up and address racial inequality so no one shall live in fear.

I knew my life had changed when the racist vernacular became different. Before education, the words of "nigger" or "coon" were the majority of racial slurs thrown in my direction. I now travel the country as a motivational speaker providing speaking services to different institutions. At these events, it is commonplace to be told, "you are one of the good ones" or asked, "how long did you smoke crack?" I realized that I was no longer perceived as a "nigger" in their eyes; I was seen as one of the good boys. A good boy is a destructive generational form of racism that continues to corrode every aspect of our society. I was perceived this way because of being clean cut, wearing a suit, and presenting professionally. In this form of racism, being a good boy has a look that they accept. In their eyes I have stayed on course with what America has decided as acceptable. As America has displayed, a person of color with tattoos, dreads, and non suit apparel is a threat to the system. Quickly I had to learn how to navigate these waters and keep my emotions in check. Upon checking, I realized my White colleagues experienced none of the line of questioning or rhetoric thrown in my direction. It reminded me that I am Black before I am a human being in America. My degree and talent are only an access card to get in the door. Being allowed through the door and being accepted are two different things. Even though I travel the country uplifting student bodies and teaching about substance use disorder, being Black overrides any accolades I've obtained. America, now that you hear my problem, let me offer you a solution!

I currently have a [post on LinkedIn](#) that went viral with over 92k views. I believe my post went viral because my story is the change we need to see. America, my life, offers the solution to the problems we currently face. I am the story of hope mixed with love. I was able to achieve all those great things with a village full of color. That color starts with a White fiancée who believed in me before I believed in myself. A team of White women who love me as their son, knowing my past is full of homelessness and dumpster diving. They never judged me on my past, but rather uplifted me for my future. They pray for my mother and genuinely ask about her well-being without even meeting her. I am blessed to have found a group of people opposite of my color who love me as a Black man. The solution is simply love from those who do not look like me. A team of White women that vary in backgrounds and have different perspectives on life make it a point to empower my life. They display this with behavior that speaks to equality and not hierarchy. They consistently ask in depth questions regarding my mental, emotional,

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and spiritual health. They not only listen to my advice but they implement it in their own life. Understand none of them suffer from substance abuse disorder however they love and respect my way of life. Whenever I have a question or need help they go to any lengths to solve the problem regardless of the challenges it may cause in their own life. That is exactly the leadership and love that families display for one another. That is the essence of equality because they display the exact behavior for their own loved ones. Period!

Unfortunately, I realize my life is not the typical village for most African American men, especially those in long-term recovery. The way to move toward this is treating the next person as you would your own family member. The golden rule has increasingly become demonstrative rhetoric used as a quick fix apology for racist behavior. I am baffled that explaining how to treat someone with respect and kindness is discussed. The people in my village of opposite color never needed a racism training. They did not need a diversity seminar from a leading authority on race to understand how to love me. They simply treated me as they would treat their own children and exactly how they wanted to be treated. When the protest hit they displayed actions of marching, praying, and concerted efforts of ways to change the system. We consistently challenge each other on readings and staying afloat with current events. Our volunteer efforts span a variety of organizations all to positively affect change. They share wisdom because they too want me to have the same success. They understand allowing me access to their networks helps to bridge the gap of equality. I want America to wake up and focus on the solution. For decade upon decade, we continue to have this conversation, and yet progress is minimal. I do not want my village to be the exception of the Black experience in America. I want my story and life to be the norm. I want the youth to learn from my mistakes and also see that color is not the soul. Being Black in America and recovery should not be a double-edged sword. Instead, it should be a symbol of hope. America, wake up by accepting, loving, and empowering all people of color because the next generation is watching!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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