

ENGLISH TEACHER

AYODEJI OGUNNIYI, 24.

*Ayodeji Ogunniyi:* My father came to America in 1988 while my mother, my older brother, and I were still in Nigeria. Back home he was the manager of a big bank and he had a bachelor's degree, but none of those credentials could be used here in America, so he had to start from scratch. He boarded with a friend, got his chauffeur's license, and worked for about a year and a half as a cab driver until he made enough money to send for us in January of 1990. We were only supposed to come here for six months, but my mother said she wasn't leaving without him. So we decided just to stay.

I was three years old when we moved to Chicago's South Side. I remember being petrified at the snow. *[Laughs.]* I remember falling asleep at day care and waking up in the back of my father's cab. Some days, I wouldn't understand where I

was, but I would just see the back of his head or hear the jazz radio station he loved, and I knew that I was with him.

For my parents, it was God, then education. My father worked to get my mother through nursing school, and she became the breadwinner. My mother always planned for everything—no matter what it was. She wanted to get us a home in the suburbs, so she worked long hours—some days sixteen hours. But she always prepared dinner and had things ready for us.

My father was more the free-loving, enjoy-every-moment-but-do-what-you-have-to-do type of person. I remember my father always sneaking in little things here and there, buying us toys that we had to hide from my mother. But he always made sure we had the homework done.

Our parents just wanted to make sure that my brother and I started right in America. So since I was a child, I was trained that I was going to be a doctor, and if not a doctor, an engineer. And if not an engineer, a lawyer. For the first fifteen years of my life, I thought that those were the only three occupations that were out there.

When I got to college, I was in the premed program, and I was going to be a doctor. I got straight As because the math and science came very natural to me, but I had no passion for it. I thought, *Do I really want to be a doctor?*

On Christmas break freshman year, I came back from school. It was December 22 and I was sitting at home in my

room and it was just me and my father in the house. I walked into the kitchen as he was eating breakfast, and out of nowhere he started talking about how he met my mother. And then he told me about how my grandmother gave me my first name, Ayodeji. It means “sudden joy.” Before he went off to work that day, he asked, “Is there anything you need?” And I said, “Just bring home some orange juice.” He left and my friend called me and we went to the mall.

I came back home around 4:00 p.m., and I turned on the news. They said, “An unidentified male’s body was found in an alley in Evergreen Park.” Things like that on the news are so peripheral to us, I didn’t think anything of it, and I just changed the channel. It was not until eleven that night that the knock came, and the police told us that man was my father and that he had been murdered. The next thing I remember is yelling “No!” really loud. And then my mother fell out, and I just had to hold her.

Within four days of the murder, the police solved the case. The murderers were eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-two. I was very, very angry. I didn’t necessarily want to retaliate. I just wanted to ask them, *Why? What happens to a person? Where do they get lost and become murderers?*

At the time I was tutoring kids at an after-school program for some extra money, and these kids came from the same impoverished conditions as the people who murdered my father. One student in the program—he was probably around sixteen

years old—always had this terrible attitude. We were doing something where everyone had to read out loud, and when it was his turn to read, he just stormed out of the classroom. I went out and I asked him, “What’s going on?” and he just broke down. He said, “It’s hard for me to read.”

There are many people that cry because they’re hurt, they’ve been neglected, but to cry because you couldn’t read? So we got him in some other programs, and he started to read—it was just, like, this *gift* for him. And by me giving that to him, it was sort of like a healing mechanism for me. I forgot about the pain of the murder, and I wanted to continue to give more of what I had to these students.

I realized that everybody at some point sits in a classroom—that could be the foundation for everything else. And then it dawned on me: *You have to do what you love*. So that’s when I said, *I’m going to follow my heart and become a teacher*.

In my classroom, I always have my students fill out a questionnaire—questions like, *What is your favorite candy? What is the favorite book you’ve ever read? Who’s the most important person in your world?*—so that whenever I see a student having an issue or something, I can refer to the question sheet and see, *OK, I’ll give him a Snickers tomorrow*. And they’re just, “How did you know this was my favorite?!” They forget that they filled that out. And they have this feeling of, *Wow, someone’s taking an interest in me*. You can’t put a price on that. And it keeps me going.

I would want my father to know that the moment he stepped into any one of my classrooms, my students would instantly know him by the principles that they learned from me and that I learned from him. I don’t need any memorabilia to honor my father’s life. I don’t need pictures—just what I instill in my students. That really gives me peace: to know that whatever happened to my father is not going to be in vain.

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