

AMWA *Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal*

Because of You

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“Author Gladys Adevey once penned the words, “Love breaks the barrier of inequality, hate, and strife. It seals friendship with significance and importance, of which we become our best.” As a Native American, I have personally experienced and witnessed many actions and remarks that have made me feel excluded from groups including the medical community. I learned how to deal with these remarks from my fourth grade teacher. My fourth-grade teacher, Sandy Mason, is the perfect embodiment of Gladys Adevey’s words and this embodiment is why she made such a significant impact on my life.

I had recently moved to my new school and, as if by divine intervention, got placed in her classroom. When I first entered Mrs. Mason’s classroom, I was nervous and apprehensive. I had heard stories of how mean she was. One student even told me, “You have Mrs. Mason? If you misbehave, she will scalp you.” Many of the families ignored her heritage or made mention of stereotypes when speaking of it. As her student though, I learned that racism and ignorance almost always go hand in hand. Mrs. Mason not only taught me how to handle racism with pride in my heritage, but with kindness of the good she believed that every person had in them.

Mrs. Mason challenged me to become more than I ever dreamed possible. She was tough not mean and expected good behavior and work ethic. A special bond bloomed between us, and as I moved from grade to grade, she followed my progress. She was the only Native American in our school system and this link probably strengthened my bond with her. Throughout each year, she sent me letters filled with congratulatory messages when awards were won and conveying encouragement when disappointments arose. My joys, triumphs, and burdens became hers.

Although with this bond that existed between us, I would love to believe that I was the apple of her eye, but I witnessed numerous times how she treated every child as if they were the most important child in her room. In her eyes, there were no lines of discrimination. She treated us all as if we were the best student in the class no matter the skin color, ethnicity, academic ability, or socio-economic status. She ignored things that had been said about her by some parents and treated every child, including theirs, with kindness. Through not only words but also unspoken smiles and gestures, she always assured every student that she was there for them to provide love, kindness, and support. In her room, every child was treated with dignity and respect. A perfect example of this was when I happened to witness one of her many acts of kindness. I had arrived early and quietly entered the room. I noticed Mrs. Mason standing over one of my peer’s desks. This peer was one whose parents had said racist things about Mrs. Mason. Mrs. Mason had been told of these conversation by other parents. She had this young man’s backpack in one hand and a stack of school supplies and new clothes in her other hand. She quickly and lovingly placed each item in his bag assuring that the surprises would be found without any attention being called to his needs. I later found out that this boy’s father had lost his job and the family was under financial duress. This young man had worn the same clothes to school for weeks and they were getting threadbare. It was just like Mrs. Mason to not only provide for his needs, but to do so in a manner that would preserve this young boy’s dignity and not bring any attention to her for her good deeds. This was in direct contrast to his parent’s treatment of her. The young man's look of awe and relief as he opened his backpack has stayed with me to this day. This scene was significant to me because I

realized what she had done for this young man; she would also do this for each and every child in her class.

The world seemed to stand still the day my mother told me that Mrs. Mason was admitted to the hospital and was in critical condition due to an unexpected stroke. For days, I visited her room and sat by her bed, praying that a miracle might bring her back. Unfortunately, that was not her fate. I found out the day she died that I had earned an award for highest honors in my department at my university. A week later surprisingly I received a congratulatory letter from Mrs. Mason. I realized that moments before her stroke she had sealed and stamped that congratulatory letter to me. She had found out from a friend at the university that I had won that honor before it was even announced to me. That moment became one of the saddest yet happiest moments in my life because I knew I had made her proud even in death. Mrs. Mason inspired me to kindness not only in her numerous well thought out acts of kindness to others, but in her day to day life. Her smiles, words of encouragement, and respect she gave me as a small child has set my future career goals. She was a mentor as an example of the pride of the Native American culture as well as the pride of herself as a person. She knew a person that believes in themselves could overcome any obstacle, including racism. Because of her, I understand that the mark of a great physician goes beyond textbook knowledge. I, as a future physician, must be dedicated to serve, portray compassion and patience, listen with ears and heart, take initiative, and have understanding that while I work to heal that life is fragile and each person deserves kindness and empathy despite words or actions done in ignorance.