

“I Have to Act Black Around Them”

Growing up Black in a White World: Profile of Tanner Douglas

If you were to take a look at any news source or social media page from the past few months, your screen would be saturated with posts, graphic images, articles, argumentative comment sections, and politically charged music all focused on spreading awareness and making a difference surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. This is not a new movement, as Black people have been discriminated against, abused, and grossly mistreated for hundreds of years. For people who live outside of the Black community or who are not Black themselves, these issues are infinitely difficult to fully comprehend. Additionally, not all Black people share the same “Black experience.” Race, identity, and social class are a huge part of the ongoing issues that we experience as a society, and they usually go hand in hand as part of what makes the overall human experience such a complex one. Human beings rely on classifications such as race to provide a comprehensive foundation for their identity. Race, however, is only one way in which identity can be developed. Other factors include environment, family life, education, and socio-economic status, all of which are just as significant in promoting the formation of one’s identity.

I recently spoke with Tanner Douglas, a longtime friend of mine, who has experienced his own unique journey of being a young Black man growing up in a predominantly White environment throughout most of his adolescent life. On a personal phone call that he and I had just a few months ago, his roommates happened to walk in on the middle of our conversation. While briefly speaking with them, Tanner seemed to completely change his persona and the way he was talking. This switch in language is not an uncommon thing. After doing some research, I was familiarized with the term “Code Switching,” which is defined as the tendency to use

different language varieties in different social situations. Certain uses of language are better suited for certain social settings and this is based on social factors such as gender, age, class, and race. I was never put in a position in my life as a young White woman where I had to use code switching, at least in any noticeable way, to fit social groups. Because of this, the sudden shift in Tanner's language was shocking to me. It was as if in a split second I was on the phone with a completely different person. After his roommates left the room, I stayed silent until he turned his attention back to me and he said, with a big smile and slight chuckle; "isn't it funny how I have to act Black around them?" This comment stuck with me in a way that I was not expecting. This is someone who I have known for several years and not once had I ever come across a moment like this with him. I chose to laugh it off with him in that instant, but this pushed me to want to dive deeper into this notion he had so casually brought up. Tanner was revealing a version of himself that I was not familiar with. Tanner and I both attended the same high school; except he was two years ahead of me. He moved on to attend Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, a drastically different environment from our suburban high school environment. Despite our phone calls every so often, I have not seen him in person in years, so this sudden change in character was intriguing to me.

Tanner is one of the most vivacious individuals I have had the opportunity to meet throughout my life thus far. He was always smiling and humming his way through the hallways, radiating genuinely positive energy. In high school, Tanner participated in football as well as the musical program with me. He loved doing the musicals and would always show up with enthusiasm and energetic behavior during rehearsals. This was where we initially connected. He was never someone who would bully, be blatantly rude to, or deliberately hurt anyone. His soul is nurturing and kind, and he strives to put out love in every direction in the hopes that it is

returned. Anytime I would see him he would stride over to me with open arms and greet me with a smooth, yet peppy, “lindseyyy, what’s up buddy how ya doin?”

Tanner had moved to Pittsburgh with his parents and younger sister in between his freshman and sophomore year of high school. He had moved several times before due to his Dad’s job as a college football coach. Despite the consistent moving, his family never really struggled to live, and he acknowledges that he feels lucky to have had both of his parents in his life. They were settled in Pittsburgh where Tanner ended up finishing out his high school career at Pine-Richland High School. Pine-Richland, or PR, is a fairly wealthy high school located in an upper-middle class suburb in the north hills of Pittsburgh. As you can imagine, PR was branded as being a predominantly *rich* and *white* school, and for legitimate reasons. The demographics at the school were almost ninety-five percent White students.

“It wasn’t my favorite experience; I honestly didn’t start to like it until I joined the musical. I mean for two and a half years I was like, man, I could go without this. It’s just - there wasn’t very much diversity, so I didn’t like that. I just felt like people there were kind of different. Like, everywhere I had been I was just able to make friends easily and find a group of people that I clicked with, and there it just took like two and a half years for me to find a group of people that I liked and that actually liked me.” Tanner said. “So, I just felt like maybe people were just judge-y, I guess, at PR, I don’t know. Just judgey and stuck in their own ways type thing.”

Attending a primarily White high school as a young Black man had an impact on the way in which Tanner portrayed himself and behaved. Although he did not really know another way at that point, he did not feel as though he really knew the Black community that he was part of. He knew his family and some extended family, but not much more. This all shifted when he

graduated high school and enrolled at Lamar University, in Beaumont, Texas. He described the shift as a challenging one, due to the huge amount of diversity he was thrown into after only being around preppy white kids for over half of his high school career.

“For about a month, maybe month and a half, I would be around people, but I would not say a word. I just didn’t wanna say the wrong thing or say something that sounded stupid and they’d be like ‘what?’ so it just took me really that first summer until I finally got comfortable being around here. And I found myself, like, who I really am. I found out more about the Black community that I didn’t really know or get to experience in High School. Like I found out more about like what “my kind of people” are like and why they may act a certain way.”

His identity from high school and his identity at college were so different from each other that it led me to wonder if this was an entirely new version of Tanner or if he now had two separate sides to his identity. As he described it, he essentially just learned how to flip a switch, or “Code Switch,” from one version of himself to the other. He used the example of how he would choose to greet my parents to the way he would choose to greet Black parents. Mine would get a firm handshake and formal greeting and the other would get dapped up with a resounding “ayyy” at the end. Both ways of greeting, however, are genuine parts of Tanner’s identity. However, despite saying that he can “flip the switch,” he still struggles with getting judged by his Black peers for the way he behaves when he is at Lamar.

“Like they say I still talk “proper” and I’m like, okay? I can speak the English language, I’ve read a book before, okay? You don’t like me cuz of that then I don’t wanna be Black, I’m sorry.” He laughs and trails off, unbothered.

As I continued asking Tanner about the significant moments he had experienced throughout his life, the one constant that would come up every so often was his involvement in football. No matter where he went, football and being on a team was something he could depend on. He played the sport throughout high school and throughout college. Both of these experiences drastically affected his outlook on his peers and on life in general. College football gave him the opportunity to meet a much wider range of people in the Black community that he had not gotten to chance to meet. Football at Pine-Richland was not dissimilar to the institutions academic setting; little diversity and lots of discrimination. Tanner always felt as though his coaches never liked him and that his teammates only put up with him because they had to. College football was a whole different world. It was a direct look into the lives of other people in his community who had considerably varied experiences from his own. He was exposed to a new group of teammates who did not have the same experiences growing up as he had.

“I got to Lamar and you’ve got a lot of kids who didn’t have both parents growing up, didn’t have fathers growing up, they might have been homeless for a minute, their parents may have been in and out of jail type stuff so...it’s like, I finally realized *he* might act this way because *he* didn’t have a father figure in his life. So, it’s like what he’s doing might look bad to you because of the way you grew up but to him it’s what he knows, it’s normal life. Seeing different peoples experiences and knowing them, like, you know you could see something and in your mind be like “that’s wrong” but in their mind they could be completely okay just because of what they’re experiencing in their life. So, life experience is the big thing that clicked with me I guess and made me change my mind about people...and about myself if that makes sense.”

Tanner and I have had countless conversations in the past about the people we grew up around. We both viewed our high school community as a generally tasteless and toxic one,

despite having found refuge in a small circle of people. Tanner, however, navigated not only the challenges of finding himself in a mainly all-White community, to then navigating and evolving throughout his experience at his mainly Black university. He has managed to solidify his identity in each community that he has been a part of while also growing into being a more well-rounded and compassionate individual. His experiences have shown me that it is important to stay compassionate and open to the people around you, especially when they may be living through an experience you may never have to go through. Becoming more educated and exposing yourself to more diversity only allows for growth and more awareness about the society we live in. Tanner's experiences are unique to him but may also be relevant to other people who have had similar situations. His story sheds an important light on the navigations and challenges surrounding race in our society, but also illuminates the fact that we all share the experience of being human.