

## **An Unsafe Space**

**Ellen:** I was reading something not too long ago and it was about how, it was about like, “what are you willing to die for”. I think social activism, I think activism itself is something that people have to put their lives on the line for and can do. That can mean your physical life right, but that can mean your mental sanity and stuff. But I think that’s a decision I made a long time ago that that’s something I’m willing to do for the rest of my life.

[Ringtail by the Blue Dot Sessions]

**N:** This is Ellen Sue Cola, and just like me she is a Brown University sophomore. She is also head of the school’s chapter of the NAACP.

**N:** Being a black person right now especially at the head of an organization like the NAACP at Brown. I have to do things that are scary or that are hurtful or that are like you know or that someone else would feel uncomfortable doing. And I do feel uncomfortable doing it sometimes. But like sometimes I feel like it’s needed.

**N:** My name Babette Thomas (music stops) and one of the uncomfortable decisions Ellen is referring to is choosing to confront racist and anti-black pamphlets that began circulating on Brown’s Campus and within Providence in February of this year.

**E:** So on Saturday, last week or this week- whatever. A friend actually hit me up on Facebook saying “So I actually found these posters, very anti Black pamphlets. Very anti Black, disgusting, racist, violent, you know stuff on campus, you know on George street. And she wanted to let me know because it was specifically targeting the NAACP president of Providence and she knows that I’m the president of the NAACP on Brown’s campus. So then she sent me some pictures of it and I was totally in shock and disgust. I was honestly just really appalled that someone would take out the time in their day to literally do something so violent and harmful to folks.

**N:** I asked Ellen to read and describe some of the pamphlets, titled “Negro Crime in Jorge O. Elorza’s Sanctuary City of Providence Rhode Island”. These pamphlets were found on Brown’s campus on Saturday, February 3rd.

**E:** So on the cover we see James Vincent who is the president of the NAACP chapter. It’s a picture of him, just a black man smiling. It has 3 bullet points which say, one says accused of defrauding the NAACP of its membership fees. The second one says, failing to address the negro crime problem and then the third one says extorts money from white people.

**N:** And that’s not all, each page of the pamphlets consists of a picture of a black or brown person and underneath, a description outlining a crime they supposedly committed in Providence. It’s unclear whether these individuals are fully guilty or innocent of committing these crimes. However, most of these profiles are racist and one sided depictions of certain events.

For example, under a photo of a young black man is a description that reads, “Arrested and charged with two counts of assault after chimping out in the lunch line at Central High school and assaulting the assistant principal. Mayor Elorza approves of this behavior and thinks it’s racist that he was arrested at all”. Besides the racist rhetoric, what this description leaves out is that shortly after these events at Central High School, a video went viral of former ( accidentally said formal lol) assistant principal Thomas Bacon violently pinning this young black male student to the ground and yelling in his face, while students and faculty try to stop him.

[Audio of Thomas Bacon yelling]

**N:** Whether or not these individuals committed these crimes is not even the biggest problem with this pamphlet. The point is that the creators of these pamphlet intentionally chose and targeted mostly black people. They did in order to make a large and hateful statement that incorrectly correlates crime and race. And these aren’t just photos of people from the internet. These are real people. Real members of the Providence community who’s identities have been used to incite fear of Black and brown people in Providence, as well to incorrectly blame them for the city’s crime problems.

**N:** Given how fear-inducing these pamphlets are, in talking to Ellen, I was impressed by how proactive she was in mobilizing in response to these events. She was clearly made uncomfortable by the proximity of these pamphlets to Brown’s campus. But for the most part, Ellen was unsurprised and ready to organize.

**E:** So then after I kind of took a minute to kind of gather my thoughts, I reached out to the Providence NAACP chapter, the secretary and the presidents and I said look what’s going on and were like. So once I brought it to their attention they were like, we need to do something about this and I was like, I’m on the same page.

**N:** Within 48 hours in collaboration with the Providence NAACP, Brown students called a press conference to address the pamphlets.

[Sounds from conference]

**N:** The press conference took place at 12:30pm on Monday February 5th, at the corner of George and Brook Street in Providence, right off of Brown’s campus. The crowd felt like one you might see at a funeral. Everyone was somber, relatively quiet and dressed in all black. The attendees consisted of a mix of Brown University students, members of the Providence NAACP and the mayor of Providence himself, Jorge Elorza The mayor, as well as other leaders from these respective communities spoke to how these pamphlets, go against community values at Brown and the greater Providence Community.

**N:** Since this event, there has been another conference on the same corner, organized by students from various colleges in Providence, including Brown and the University of Rhode Island. Two and half weeks after the pamphlets had been found Brown’s campus, Christina

Paxson, the president of the University, finally sent out an email addressing the pamphlets. Two weeks of Black students organizing, two weeks of Black students being afraid, two weeks of Black students feeling uncared for. So why did the administration take so long in sending out a school wide response to these racist pamphlets?

In the email, Christina Paxson writes:

“Some students have asked why the administration did not send out a communication decrying the flyers shortly after they appeared. In hindsight, we should have done this. In an era where there seems to be a steady drumbeat of difficult news [...] it can be difficult to draw the line between saying too little, on one hand, and responding to everything either locally, nationally or internationally, on the other hand. A communication denouncing the flyer would have been an opportunity to reaffirm to members of our community who identify as black that Brown is committed to their wellbeing. I hope that this communication, even if late, is taken in that spirit.”

**N:** These events and the lack of response from Brown’s administration come at the 50th anniversary of the Black Student walkout at Brown. Triggered by racist events on campus, in 1968 a group of Black women led a week long student protest to demand better treatment of Black students and that Brown prioritize raising the university’s Black population to 11%. The current Black population at Brown 50 years later is around 7 percent.

So although I am impressed by Black student’s ability to mobilize in the face of such, core-shaking events, I’m not surprised, because Black students have historically been the ones who have had to organize as a result of a lack of action by the administration. These blatant expressions of racism that threaten the safety of black students have happened before, and they will continue to happen. They will continue to happen as long as the responsibility to address issues of racism on Brown’s campus slip through the fingers of the administration and fall upon the shoulders of black students. This is not the first story I’ve made about patterns of anti-blackness on Brown campus, and I know it won’t be my last, but I’m tired. And so is Ellen.

**E:** First and foremost, no, I don’t think it too surprising, like I know that racism exists regardless of some other narratives of Racism being over and all that nonsense. So I know that racism exists, I guess what I was kind of surprised and taken back by was the fact that it’s so close. That it’s so close to me. And of course being a black body is very scary. This person could literally be in a class that I’m taking, could literally be in my dorm. Could literally be my next door neighbor, and that’s frightening.

**N:** In the face of fear, in the face of violence, in the face of anti-blackness and in a face of a stagnant administration, what does this mean for Black students on Brown’s campus?

**E:** I think another thing to be a Black student on this campus right now means to be vigilant and to be militant as well. And militant not like fighting. Militant in the fact to be on your guard, to not be naive or think that this isn’t happening.

**N:** Ellen's words serve as a reminder to all of us that Brown is not a bubble safe or exempt from the racism and white supremacy that plagues the country and the world. These acts of racism are real and they are happening on Brown's campus. So I urge you to think, "when something like this happens again, because it will happen again, what will you do to mobilize against it?"

[Ringtail by the Blue Dot Sessions]