

Why Equity is Important to Me

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Early Years

My equity journey began in Sebring, Florida. This tiny town reflected much of the south during the 1970's. We all attended the same school because there was only one in town. However, we lived in very separate places. Honestly, there was still a space for people of color to live. While we had classmates of different races, our friends were confined to our own race. I don't remember ever hearing that as an expectation. It just was the way things were. I do remember cheerleader tryouts in the 7th grade. One girl wore a shirt that said, "we need more black cheerleaders" on it. I was stuck by this because I had never noticed the discrepancy on teams and cheer squads. That was the first time I recognized my privilege even though I didn't have a word for it.

Class wasn't a big topic in my hometown as everyone lived right about the poverty line or lower. The town is frequently cited as one of the poorest in the United States. In that, we were similar to everyone in the town. However, the 'quarter' where people of color lived was drastically less financially stable than the rest of the town.

Being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community was something we did not regularly speak about as young people. Slurs and homophobic comments were constant, and jokes were everywhere. At church, we kept hearing that being gay was a one-way ticket to hell. I remember being at a party and sitting next to my friend, Cliff. We were talking and he told me he had a crush on two twins in our class. One was male and the other female. My curiosity was piqued and I told him we needed to find out which twin he really liked. Our Nancy Drew sleuthing determined that while he did like Ross, he could never act on it because the community and church would turn on him.

Students with disabilities were not in our school as there were no services for them. Some went to a separate school that used to house students of color. Many children with disabilities did not go to school at all. The only place I saw these children was in the medical office where my parents worked. These experiences, as I changed treatment tables and emptied trash cans, were critical to my initial interest in disabilities. I wasn't so much learning about them as I was immersed from birth in the medical model of disability.

College

I remember going to a school-wide church service to celebrate Black History Month. I was very interested in learning and hearing music I did not know. The music I heard remains with me to this day. When the group began to sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" they all stood up. I stood up with them because that seemed to be the thing to do. The person next to me grabbed my arm and pulled me back into my seat. She whispered loudly, "this is for them and not us." I remember thinking that song was one of the most hauntingly beautiful things I had ever heard.

Career

Throughout my life and career since college, I have been learning and unlearning about equity and access. While disabilities became my specific area of interest, I am always drawn to race, LGBTQUIA+ and poverty as well because of the colleagues and friends I have met along the way. I came to the Equity Committee of NAFME very ready to advocate for students with disabilities. During the almost four years I have been on the committee, I have learned more than I could have imagined about many of the intersections between race, class, gender and sexuality as well as disability and how they impact the music education profession. It is in these intersections that our work is now nestled. I find that I am more understanding of the various intersections with each encounter I have and wish everyone could have the opportunity to learn and grow in their equity journey through the collegial experiences of the NAFME Equity Committee.

We are never finished and there is always more to learn. I check my privilege often now as I have a better understanding of my role as a white female in the equity and access arena. We can all begin where we are and grow from there. How far we are in our journey is far less important than how far we have come.