OLEVIA BOYKIN

(Class of 2014)

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IT SEEMED LIKE A SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD INTERVIEW. "Do you feel like you have been discriminated against at Notre Dame?" the USA Today reporter asked. "How is the university doing at diversity efforts? What has been your experience being black at Notre Dame?"

I answered honestly: "I don't think I would describe my experience as discriminatory. . . . The university could be doing more to increase diversity and make life easier for its minority students. . . .It's exhausting to be black at Notre Dame."

To this day, I think it would be difficult for many black students to disagree with my statements based on content. It is fairly well established that it is not easy to be black at Notre Dame, regardless of whether you are fully enveloped in the black community, completely separate, or somewhere in between. Further, most of us know two versions of the life of black students at Notre Dame: the version we talk about with nostalgia to prospective students, and the real version, which is much less rosy. Nevertheless, the context of my interview, the fact I spoke the wrong version, got me into trouble.

I've spent my time at Notre Dame in a precarious position. I'm black, but I grew up in a small, basically all-white town in Wisconsin. Being light-skinned, and with most of my close friends both from home and at Notre Dame being white, I struggled to feel "black enough" at Notre Dame. In fact, I have never felt fully accepted into the black community at the university.

At the same time, I' m clearly not white, nor am I upper middle-class like most of the white students at Notre Dame. I often felt that, in order to be fully accepted into either community, the black or the white, one would basically need to entirely neglect the other. But I didn't want to do that, so I straddled the two as best as I could. While my close friends remained mainly white, I was on the board of the Black Student Association and participated in events and social life accordingly.

When the interview was published in *USA Today* in March 2013, responses among members of the Notre Dame community were polarized. The black alumni association reached out to me to discuss how they could help improve the experience of black students at Notre Dame. I was supposed to recruit some black students to talk with a few alumni at a roundtable. It seemed harmless; in fact, I was excited.

In the end, only one other black student came, and there were six or seven alumni. While it was not their intent, I felt attacked by them, as if I were in a lion's den. The alumni were defensive; my words were used against me; it became a cohort of fair1y disconnected alums telling me why I was personally inadequate at handling life at Notre Dame.

Several students and administrators weren't happy either. Many of my fellow BSA board members echoed the alumni's feelings. I was told I needed to do better at handling life here, that it wasn't my place to publicize my personal issues.

At the same time, there were students, professors, and administrators who reached out to me, empathized with me, and stood up for me. In fact, this was the spring semester of 2013, the semester I won the Frazier Thompson scholarship. That helped me feel like I wasn't universally disliked by the larger black community and has significantly eased my financial stress in my final year.

I think most of us learn how and get used ro adequately navigating the waters of race at Notre Dame: ignoring ignorant comments, being the only black person in class, being ever-conscious of how we are perceived. But this was the most emotionally straining learning ex

perience for me, as I lost any semblance of cohesion with the black community.

Fortunately, while being black at Notre Dame and its accompanying trials and takeaways have been important, they are not the most salient or defining of my experiences at Notre Dame. I have had the opportunity to get close to professors who challenge me, who have excited in me a passion for academia. I have worked with a professor from the onset of a paper idea through its publication, learning the process of academic inquiry. I got to do archival research at Howard University, teach a financial literacy course, and design a website for another professor. A directed readings course with yet another professor was the most intellectually challenging and informative class of my college career.

Working with these brilliant and passionate professors-who challenge me and care about me; who tell me when I am flat wrong or when I need to do or be better; who will buy me a book I badly need to read, take me out to eat to celebrate or mourn a score on the LSAT, and give me honest advice; who have become some of my closest and most cherished friends-has been the most formative part of my experience at Notre Dame.

Second to my experience with professors in shaping who I am today was studying abroad. I went to Athens, Greece, after previously having never left North America. Besides traveling all around Greece, I went to London, Paris, Istanbul, Madrid, Rome, and Granada. I gained a new perspective on the importance of understanding language and culture as well as paying attention to international news. At the same time, while in a program with seventy-two other students that resembled the diversity of Notre Dame, within a homogeneous country notorious for racism, I felt liberated from my color. All the friends I made, from African immigrants to my Greek barista, showed me how similar all people are, how race, as part of our identity, ought to be trivial. This feeling of liberation made me realize that I had felt burdened at some point.

When I thought back to my time at Notre Dame- "the happiest place in the world," as a best friend would call it-I became disillusioned. I realized how different Notre Dame could be. By "different" I mean easier for black students. Being in Athens showed me that there should not be a line to straddle between racial communities.

Surely, when I came to Notre Dame I did not anticipate any of the experiences I have highlighted here. In fact, thinking back, I had relatively poor reasons for coming to Notre Dame. My boyfriend wanted to stay in the Midwest, a desire that severely limited our options. Notre Dame sounded fun; I was drawn to all the tradition, the people seemed genuinely good at heart, and it felt right in my gut. When I got to campus I spent two years basically floundering. I struggled to feel smart, so I overindulged in clubs. As a club leader, I learned that I love having the agency to help people, to make people feel heard. Since then, I have tutored at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, interned at the local public defender's office, and started a book club with the girls in detention at the juvenile justice center. Next year, I go to law school.

It's funny how over the long term everything weaves together into some sort of serendipitous narrative, even though day to day it all seems to be in disarray. While I felt like I was foundering in freshman and sophomore years, the seeds were being planted for my last two years. I took classes with great professors; was granted the Doan Scholarship, which opened a network of professors while also relieving financial strain; and participated in community service, which illuminated to me my true values. While going abroad was an opportunity I sought to broaden my horizons, it helped me home in on what was important back in the US. The *USA Today* article and the ensuing fallout, for all the stress and mayhem they caused, taught me how to endure criticism and be assertive. My relationships with professors, which grew gradually out of courses or research apprenticeships, have defined me, made me more intellectually curious, independent, and confident.

And so, here we are. I just graduated, and this fall I go to law school. I would argue my story is not unique, either as a student at Notre Dame or as a black student at Notre Dame. Being black at Notre Dame has not been easy; in fact it has been relatively difficult, but I am better for it. The opportunities that have been extended to me through this university-from grant funding for my senior thesis and research apprenticeships, to developing close relationships with professors, to study abroad-all have had a hand in shaping me into the person I am today. As I move forward, I bring these lessons with me, both the personal and intellectual growth I have experienced and the friends I have made along the way.