

## It Started With a Phone Call

Lorraine Williams owns a modified copy of *Webster's Dictionary*, one that does not include the term "reservation." Deeming my auntie merely "inquisitive" would grossly belittle her caliber. I am Auntie's favorite niece...At least, that is the story she tells me. As her most adored, I hold no shame in defining my aunt truthfully. Regretfully and affectionately I say; Mrs. Williams is a first class busybody. *National Enquirer*, you can not hold a flame to this woman. She knows everything about everyone at all times. Yes, she can be overbearing. No, her two cents are not always welcomed, but I appreciate her. After our mind provoking interview I appreciate my aunt for more than her branch within my family's tree. I appreciate her force as a woman.

Upon interviewing my mother's eldest sister, naively I assumed total knowledge over her life's details. "What a cinch!" I thought. "I know this woman. I know her down to those holey neon "Haynes Her Way" panties!" Auntie and her family have lived in the subdivision diagonal from mine for longer than I can remember. She is 56, married to James Williams, mother of two, and loud. Her kids were my evil nemeses. Her house my refuge from overbearing parents. Though I knew many "surface" details about my aunt's life, never had I taken the chance of exploration deep into Lorrain's womanhood. It started with a phone call...

"Hey baby, your momma told me your period was acting up! Are you still taking those "Women's One-A-Days" *thingies* I told you about?"

These words blared through my telephone's connection even before the exchanging of "hellos" last Sunday. Remember, I told you she was nosey. After an

exasperating ten minutes of explanation as to why “Women’s One-A-Days” played no hand in alleviating menstrual cramps, our interview gradually began.

“Aunti,” I said, “I’m going to ask you a few questions. They are about how your gender has shaped your life.” Before freeing the words from my mouth, her complains began. “How in the world would I know how my gender has shaped me,” this and “I have food on the stove,” that. Ignoring her gripe and, without hesitation, I proceeded with my opening inquiry. I asked if my grandparents or her community restricted her with gender expectations. Intriguing was her response. She said, “There were none that I can think of. I was a tomboy as I child and really didn’t think about my sex. All I could think about was me being black...I know expectations were placed on me since I was black.”

As she spoke, my investigative mind quickly dissected the meaning behind Auntie’s words. Clearly my aunt placed greater significance on her race than sex. As a child, she saw herself first minority then, female. Why? I began contrasting and comparing my aunt’s history to those stories taught during my Women’s Studies course. Auntie’s sentiments coincide seamlessly with those women of her race and ethnic background. During the seventies black women faced dual blows. They were oppressed because of their skin’s color *and* their body parts. Unquestionably, my aunt considered being black a far greater limitation than being female. She reminisced that as small child she went without medical attention since the nearest hospital was for “whites only.” Moreover, her father was a share cropper in the south for rich white men. Never did her family hold enough since they were constantly indebted to whites.

“Aunti,” I said, trying to steer our conversation away from race and back to women’s issues. “Tell me about your kids...Did you raise them in terms of gender expectations? What kind of male or female did you want them to be?” Upon voicing this inquiry I received a deep laugh. “I don’t think I placed any gender expectations on my kids! I mean, they weren’t placed on me so I didn’t want to put them on my kids. I didn’t care what my kids became. I just didn’t want my kids to end up being homos (laughing). I didn’t want my girl to end up in an army uniform...”

At first I was puzzled by, what seemed obvious contradictions. My aunt said she placed no gender expectations on her children but admonished her daughter bending “gender norms.” Auntie also said she did not want her kids to “end up being homos” as if homosexuality stemmed from some form of airborne disease. My aunt’s responses revealed much. Though she unconscious of its repercussions her gender patterns and social conditions are clearly reflected in her life. In her defense, how could she escape stereotypes? My aunt was saturated in a society with regulated roles and expectations. Years of bible memorizations and “Leave It to Beaver” reruns have left her a little tainted. For these reasons I do believe she will never completely discard gender ideals and biases.

Time has changed my feisty aunt’s perception of gender roles. She admits, “I’m not the tomboy I once was.” Aunti married James in 1985. They were happy. They still are happy but...Isn’t there always a pesky, “but?” Warningly she paints their story, “It wasn’t until I got married that I realized men were different from women. On my wedding day my husband’s grandmother pulled me aside and said,

“He’s a man.” She said it *three* times. My God, she scared me so bad...I thought he was a drunk, a womanizer, worse an abuser. Now I understand exactly what she meant. Men, they want to be the head of the household and have to be in control all the time. I remember when my paychecks started getting bigger than James.’ He wanted me to quit!”

Awww...I smiled. So this strong caramel woman does recognize gender inequality. Through marriage, Auntie gained an insider’s view of “man.” Though they mean well and are (sometimes) nice to look at, society has brainwashed men to crave dictatorship. Upon childhood my aunt never experienced this truth, her only limitation- race. Only during adulthood, through the sanctity of marriage, did she feel man’s cold oppressive breath. I believe many minority women of the sixties and seventies only realized their societal limitations after marriage. As children, they were quickly forced to develop tough exteriors amidst the Civil Rights Movement’s turmoil. Once married, minority women’s husbands resented their unyielding skins. Their husbands intimidating tried to force wives back into submissive closets. Lucky for Auntie, James was more talk than action. He promptly ceased his nonsensical complains about her being overpaid after she stopped paying their bills for a month.

I closed our telephone interview with two, seemingly innocent questions. “What do you think of the lives of young women today? In what ways are they similar to yours?” How her “colorful” remarks still managed to bring a blush to my cheeks, I can not tell you. “I think young women today are really successful,” she said. “There are more females in powerful positions. A modern woman still wants the same things I did during my younger days. They still want security. Most still

want happy homes and kids. Women still dream of finding their princes...or princesses.” As my embarrassing mirth subsided I managed, “I think I want that too Auntie...I *know* I want that too.”

## **Interview between Sharlene Hollowell and Lorraine Williams**

**Tell me about the childhood expectations placed upon you as a girl by your family and community. What did it mean to be a girl in your community?**

- There were none that I can think of. I was a tomboy as I child and really didn't think about my sex. All I could think about was me being black...I know expectations were placed on me since I was black.
- Humm...I never thought about it the media did more than my [girl] friends at setting expectations. I was always a content person.
- I *can* remember wanting to play football with my three brothers and their friends. Since they were all stronger than me they'd tackle me quickly. My father once yelled at me saying, "You're a girl! You're not supposed to be playing football!"

**What kind of paid or unpaid work did you do after schools?**

- After college I tutored, became a maid, cleaned hotels, and worked in Roses as sales person.

**Is there one experience that stands out about what it's like to be a woman in the workforce?**

- Maybe I'm not the best person to ask these questions. I never really thought about this stuff.

**Well, do you think there are any differences for women in the workforce today?**

- I was an elementary school teacher and in my profession I was always around other females. Because of this I really didn't see all that much "discrimination." I guess there *are* more women in administrative positions than when I first started teaching. There are also more men elementary school teachers. You use to never see men teach in elementary schools, only high. Now there are like...8 women to every 1 man. Before there were 0 male teachers in elementary schools.

**How have you chosen to spend your life, single, married, in same sex relationships or partnerships? Do you have kids?**

- I have been married (to a man) for 22 years. I have two kids. A girl and boy.

**How did you wish to raise your children in terms of gender expectations and what kind of male and female did you want your kids to be?**

- I don't think I placed any gender expectations on my kids! I mean, they weren't placed on me so I didn't want to put them on my kids. I didn't care what my kids became. I just didn't want my kids to end up being homos (laughing\*). I didn't want my girl to end up in an army uniform...

**Why?**

That's a male role. To be honest I wouldn't want my son to end up in one either. I just want my kids to be safe.

**So do you think there are male and female roles?**

- [Pause]...I use to feel that way. I mean the bible says that the sexes have "roles" but I think they can blend.

**What historical events or movements in American social and political life had an impact on your life?**

- Brown vs. Board of Education. All my life I wanted to see schools integrated. Finally, my 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, I was able to go to school with both white and black kids. It had nothing to do with me being a woman.

**What personal event had a great impact on your life?**

- I'm not the tomboy I once was. It wasn't until I got married that I realized men were different from women. On my wedding day my husband's grandmother pulled me aside and said, "He's a man." She said it *three* times. My God, she scared me so bad...I thought he was a drunk, a womanizer, worse an abuser. Now I understand exactly what she meant. Men, they want to be the head of the household and have to be in control all the time. I remember when my paychecks started getting bigger than James.' He wanted me to quite!

**Were your hopes and dreams fulfilled as a young woman?**

- Of course! I became a teacher. I always wanted to be a teacher and I became one.

**What do you think about growing old in our society? Is there an experience that stands out in your mind about what it means to grow older?**

- HAHAHA I don't think about getting old!

**How does aging play and impact on your life especially because you are a woman?**

- Growing old...I have no idea. They tell me that women get less than men but I don't worry about that. What I worry about is paying my two kids through college!

**What do you think of the lives of younger women today? In what ways do you think they are similar to, or different from your own?**

- I think young women today are really successful. There are more females in powerful positions. A modern women still wants the same things I did during my younger days. They still want security. Most still want happy homes and kids. Women still dream of finding their princes...or princesses (laughing\*)