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# A Shared Journey Toward Social Justice Activism

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**ABSTRACT**

As a two-educator household, we entered the University of South Carolina's EdD program in the spring of 2020 expecting to earn a degree that would provide greater financial support for our family while simultaneously refining our teaching practices. However, the program's emphasis on social justice and advocacy resulted in more than just additional letters after our names—it transformed and reshaped our identities and perspectives, not only as individuals, but also as educators and parents. We were challenged to confront our assumptions and positionalities, broaden our understanding of equity, and embrace our roles as agents of change within our immediate spheres of influence. This article follows our shared journey and incorporates honest self-reflections of two White educators turned social justice advocates through the discovery of our White privilege and an increased awareness of the social injustices in our world but most acutely in our profession.

**KEYWORDS**

*social justice and advocacy, education, White identity, narrative, transformation*

By DiAnna's recollection, when Jason earned a master's degree from the College of Charleston, we agreed DiAnna would be the next member of the household to earn a degree. So when, 8 years later, Jason casually mentioned a desire to obtain a doctorate, DiAnna's competitive spirit was ignited. Citing the prior verbal contract she considered indissoluble, she joined Jason in submitting an application to the University of South Carolina's (USC) EdD program. Thus, in the early weeks of those uncertain days in the spring of 2020, we both received acceptance letters that would propel us into an unexpected experience that would transcend our highest academic pursuits.

This article tells the story of two married educators turned agents of change by way of an EdD program focused on critical action research through a social justice lens. Our story is not necessarily a blueprint for others to follow, but a narrative for us to share our journey of growth and transformation. Through our accounts, we hope to underscore the importance of reflective practices and learning from our educational and personal experiences to improve pedagogy and promote equity in today's classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

## OUR INTENTIONS

Our initial intent was not to become activists. Ashamedly, but perhaps not surprisingly, our doctoral pursuits focused not on social justice and equity, but rather affordability, timing, and the flexibility of an asynchronous program. As a two-educator household, we sought a way to better support our growing family and become better teachers in the process. We entered USC's EdD program expecting to earn a degree (i.e., initials to follow our name). What we did not anticipate was the rich transformation and reshaping of who we are in the world—as individuals, as educators, and as parents.

To help readers understand the journey, we must first disclose our identities (Newman, 1997), introducing ourselves as not only unique individuals but also members of various social groups that inherently shaped who we were at the commencement of this journey. Here and throughout the chapter, we use offset italics to indicate our individual voices:

> DiAnna: I grew up as the only child in a White, middle-class family and was decidedly influenced by my environment. I lived in a predominantly White neighborhood in the suburbs outside Columbia, SC, which fed my predominantly White schools. I had White teachers, participated in extracurriculars with White peers, and hung out with my best friends—who also happened to be White. My family worshiped at a predominantly White church, and in general, I associated and interacted with predominantly White individuals. Racial discourse, bias, differences, and injustice were unknown to me, quite frankly, because race was not a part of me. It existed in others, while my world existed in a White bubble, unassuming and unaware of just how unaware I was.
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> Jason: While our paths didn't cross until adulthood, DiAnna and I grew up less than 15 minutes away from each other, so our backgrounds and socioeconomic status were not all that different. One of the most influential parts of my childhood was growing up with aunts, uncles, and cousins who lived next door. All my experiences were significantly shaped and influenced by family members who shared similar perspectives, backgrounds, and influences. However, these influences were monochromatic and served as a barrier to the diverse perspectives and experiences of anyone who didn't look like us. Truthfully, I didn't know there was *anything other than country music stations on the radio until I got my first car.*



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*Like my taste in music, my worldview and perspective were equally White-washed and void of diverse exposure*.

As fate would see to it, we both independently moved to Charleston, SC and started teaching at the same predominantly White, affluent high school. We were teaching replicas of the students we were years before, so our limited understanding of diversity and inclusion went largely unchanged and unchallenged for over a decade and resulted in practices that maintained the racial and cultural status quo (Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

When we entered the EdD program at USC, our initial intentions, positionality, and personal goals existed in sharp contrast to the expectations and beliefs of our faculty and program advisors. Fortunately, when faced with the academic readings, coursework, and discussions, our own consciences compelled the removal of our White-colored glasses—to recognize our position of privilege and the disservice our teaching practices were affording our students. This realization, however, did not come overnight, and it was not without its own degrees of complexity and discomfort, as we elaborate individually:

> DiAnna: Somehow I missed the memo that our doctoral program was so heavily influenced and driven by the call for social justice. I was convinced I would be writing a dissertation on improving student literacy and self-efficacy through reciprocal teaching—and I've got several drafts of that initial proposal to prove it. So when, during a meeting about my proposed problem of practice, I was told it did not check the social justice box, I was completely miffed! I had identified a valid problem of practice in my classroom and a vision for a research study to address it. How dare I be told I could not pursue it because it didn't check some box someone thought important! And to complicate matters, how would I ever come up with a problem of practice centered on social justice in a classroom full of White students?! Oh, the naivete!

> Jason: In one of our first diversity classes, the professor asked us to consider possible topics that we might adopt for our eventual dissertation. I was so misguided that my first proposal was on the use of virtual labs versus traditional "wet" labs in the curriculum. After a 30-minute Zoom meeting with the professor, he told me a story about the decor in his classroom when he first started teaching. Being a sports enthusiast, he had baseball posters and team paraphernalia prominently displayed around his room. Reflecting back, he shared with me that he was embarrassed and even ashamed of his choices for decor because only a small group of students would feel comfortable entering his classroom. For the first time, I considered what my students might feel like when they came into my classroom. What would they see? Would they feel like they belonged? Would they feel inspired? Would they feel safe? A whole avalanche of questions forced me to consider the experiences of others and if I had made those experiences better or worse.

With such obvious—and likely offensive—ignorance demonstrated in the early moments of our EdD pursuits, we can hardly fathom what the USC faculty saw in our applications to merit admission into their program. We certainly were not educated in social justice practices, nor were we versed in the complexities of systemic inequities. Maybe we got lucky. Maybe they saw right through us and realized the depth of our ineptness. Maybe it was divine intervention. Whatever the rationale, our deficiencies underscored the exact reason why we needed to be part of this program.

## OUR DISCOVERY

Social justice has been defined as both a product and a process (Adams et al., 2007) in that it speaks to the goals of an equitable society and also to the methods used to achieve those goals. The *what* and *how* of social justice involves individuals with a sense of their own identity and agency and a sense of responsibility to understand others' identities and agency, all coexisting in the broader context of the world (Adams et al., 2007). As there is increased attention on creating a more democratic, equitable, and just society, the focus turns to classrooms as a space to compel critical consciousness. Central to the classroom and the learning within it is the teacher and their role in dismantling oppressive structures and building socially just practices and practitioners (Adams et al., 2007). In fact, many scholars charge teachers to put their agency into action by diversifying curriculum and pedagogy and enacting meaningful multicultural and socially just education (Banks, 2004; Boyd & Glazier, 2017; Coldron & Smith, 1999; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Marshal & Olivia, 2006; Moore, 2007; Sanjakdar & Premier, 2023; Sosa, 2020). However, before a teacher can begin to take steps in their own classroom, they must first identify their positionality, agency, and identity and reflect how all three of those factors frame the curriculum alongside how and why they teach it. Despite literature suggesting teachers serve as the cornerstone of putting agency into practice and the importance of multicultural education in the classroom for the benefit of every student, our focus remained on the curriculum, not on the role of the teacher and certainly not on the equitable education of students. We explain:

> DiAnna: For the majority of my career, I operated under the mistaken impression that as long as I was a "good" teacher, I could reach any student. I adopted a curriculum that was handed to me my first year of teaching—one that provided all the diversity you would expect in a survey of classical British Literature. Despite countless opportunities to broaden this curriculum over the following 15 years, the texts listed on my syllabus remained the same. I relied on the knowledge that learning is a personal process, never recognizing that what is personal for each individual is not the same for everyone. I was comfortable teaching those works of capital-I Literature and as far as I knew, my students were comfortable learning them because for the most part, they were reflected in them. But in the way of oil and water, comfort and social justice are not mutually compatible.

> Jason: Before earning my doctorate, my pedagogy and instructional compass aligned to the strict adherence of district and state standards. The rhetoric from teaching professionals around me cited "the standards" as the ultimate guide and goal when determining what students should learn. So when my test scores were consistently higher than proficiency minimums, I let myself believe that I had achieved the title of "World's Greatest Teacher." As I began to understand the systemic influences and injustices that are deeply embedded within our educational system, my identity as a successful teacher began to crumble.

While our EdD coursework assisted us in uncovering our problems of practice, it also started to crack the veneer that was covering our racial ignorance. Just as Jupp et al. (2016) called for preparation to "conscientize" a predominantly White teaching force for "teaching across understandings of race, class, culture, language, and other identity differences in increasingly diverse public schools" (p. 1152), our professors provided a catalog of readings to support our work and challenge our thinking. Some readings were particularly arduous for this duo as they forced an introspective

approach to the content before being able to reflect on and apply its message to our studies. However, such introspection compelled us to finally confront some misinformed beliefs about ourselves and our students.

Formerly, we operated under a colorblind philosophy, believing that not seeing color was an inclusive way of treating all students with equanimity. However, Ansell (2006) astutely identified the irony involved with the enormity of privilege that must exist in a person claiming a colorblind mentality, underscoring Ladson-Billings's (1998) claim that colorblind teachers cannot discern the privileged from the disadvantaged in the classroom. Reading and digesting works centered on multicultural and anti-racist approaches to the classroom caused the fibers in the layers of our positionalities to unravel. In this way, even though in all likelihood we were working on our final and highest degree, the true education of DiAnna and Jason Sox began. We reflect:

> DiAnna: Looking back, there were several readings that shook my world and contributed to my journey of transformation. I remember literally feeling the nerve endings on my skin tensing, my heart rate increasing, and my body temperature rising as I read through an article, only to realize my defensive posturing was the very definition of the 'White Fragility' being described (DiAngelo, 2011a). I remember nodding my head in solidarity with each example McIntosh (1998) listed in her knapsack and the astonished realization that not everyone could do the same. But the most profound, life-altering concept to pass my eyes came from Derman-Sparks et al. (2011) who suggested children, as young as preschool age, can discern racial biases and hierarchies from the adults around them. Imagine, if you will, a record scratching as I read and reread that assertion. I was never taught race. I was never forced to see it or talk about it or consider it—and I was now living through the impacts of that omission in my identity-making. I was now suffering the pruning that must precede the blossoming, and I suddenly felt the enormity of protecting my children from discovering that same racial awareness late in life. As our son was 5 at the time and our daughter 3, I started to really question what we were teaching them about culture and race and justice. Embarrassingly, my first response was close to 'nothing.' As a result, I grew determined to not let that be my answer ever again.
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> Jason: I remember having a transformational change in how I defined the word 'racism.' Prior to enrollment, I would have said racism was limited to an individual's internal feelings or an outward attack toward others that required a "change of heart." DiAngelo (2011a), McIntosh (1998), and others unveiled my privileges until I saw the oppressive influence of racism in every facet of life. I remember feeling so frustrated, helpless, and distraught. And while discovery and critical analysis of systems of oppression are important for a budding social justice advocate, I needed to see that there were avenues of hope. Channeling my frustrations into concrete efforts helped me understand that one person's actions can be significant, regardless of how small the first step may be. As a change agent, I have a responsibility to ensure principles of equity are not just theoretical ideals but important parts of my classroom teachings and my family's lived experiences.

As new discoveries emerged and recurring themes found their way into our thoughts, writings, and conversations, our social identities began to shift. We could feel the tension building within us as we saw our world through an expanded lens of awareness. We were taking our first steps on a metaphorical social justice escalator, unsure of the final destination but certain we were no longer the same people.

## OUR TRANSFORMATION

We are sorry to report that our metamorphosis into social justice advocacy was not as easy as flipping a switch. Contrarily, we align with scholars who argue that social justice is not a static goal but rather an ongoing process that requires continuous learning and adaptation (Bell, 2007), dialogue and activism (Young, 2011), as well as critical reflection (Giroux, 2011). Indeed, moving along this continuum together—the shared readings, car ride discussions, course content, interactions with other cohort members, aha moments, writing our dissertations, and late-night conversations around the dinner-table-turned-homework-table—began to reshape our identities as individuals, educators, and parents. With all three identities linked, altering one inevitably impacted the others. As our dominoes of deficiencies and ignorance began to fall, slowly and even cautiously but continuously, there were times and indicators along the way that signaled a transformation was occurring.

### As Individuals

Introspection is a crucial and necessary element in anti-racist work, particularly for understanding and dismantling one's biases (DiAngelo, 2011b; Tatum, 1992). It requires a personal commitment as no external force can compel someone to genuinely reflect on their biases and privileges. Though our stories mirror, often overlapping, and while we enjoyed the benefit of each other's company on our journey, we were still two independent individuals walking a rather narrow road toward social justice and equity, growing and changing in our own yet similar ways. We explain:

> DiAnna: For me, a moment of awareness that I was changing in my thinking and understanding came when I didn't react with a defensive posture while reading an article or participating in a discussion that labeled me as privileged, colormute, biased, or fragile. It was a moment of acceptance of who I've been and resting in the knowledge that that's not who I'm going to be. I started to realize that growth comes from embracing discomfort and allowing myself to sit with the complexities of my identity within the social structures around me. Rather than shutting down or dismissing the perspectives presented (as would have been my former go-to model), I found a desire to engage more deeply in more meaningful conversations and courage to uncover blind spots I unconsciously carried for so long.
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> Jason: In comparison to the giants in multicultural education we were studying, my story of individual awareness seems inconsequential. I was designing a lab for my Physics class that required students to predict the number of rubber bands required for a Barbie doll to safely jump off the top of our rotunda stairs and not hit the ground below. I promise it is a real experiment, and I am not crazy—well, no more than any other high school teacher is. Needing to purchase several dolls for the experiment, I headed to the store. When I reached the doll aisle, I instinctively reached up and grabbed several White dolls with blond hair, feeding my stereotypical expectation of what Barbie should look like. When I realized the faces in the boxes were not consistent with the faces in my classroom, I put away my initial choices and took a literal and metaphorical step back to broaden my perspective. It was a unique experience, blending embarrassment and shame with excitement and pride that the recognition of White identity prompted alternative actions to prioritize my students' diverse lives and experiences.

The pursuit of social justice is never the same for any two individuals. Such a personalized experience spurred from

introspective reflection demands a commitment to continuous learning and self-improvement. Whether initiated by the reading of academic literature, a conversation with another person, or a failed previous attempt, each opportunity serves as an opportunity for growth. The realization that there is always more to learn encouraged us to approach new challenges with humility and resilience. We embraced the idea that social justice requires a growth mindset and recognized that social justice is not a fixed destination but an evolving journey. Applying those ideals in our individual lives inevitably boiled over into the discovery of our privileges in our working environment.

## As Educators

According to Min et al. (2022), there is "general agreement among education scholars that teachers need to be social justice-oriented change agents by enacting pedagogy that promotes social justice in their classroom" (p. 565). We were inundated with this overwhelming scholarship during our coursework and the writing of our dissertations, which compelled us to adopt this philosophy and combat different forms of oppression within our own studies and within our own classrooms. For example:

> DiAnna: A huge indicator that signaled changes happening in me occurred through the reinvention of what would become my third and final topic (i.e., problem of practice) for my dissertation. When my initial problem of practice did not check the social justice box, my professor suggested reading Between the World and Me (Coates, 2015) with my all-White English honors students. I decided to accept this challenge, primarily due to a feeling of limited alternatives, and revised my problem of practice to examine the positive or negative changes to self-efficacy and social empathy when a group of White students and their White teacher read a text that is racially and culturally dissimilar to their own identities. After another year in the program with more classes geared toward social justice alongside the transformative understanding of my agency and positionality, I was all-in—ready to rattle some monochromatic cages, to ruffle some privileged feathers! But this, too, was short lived. Ironically, facing the inevitability of actually putting my dissertation into practice caused me to realize I was too fearful to be a cage rattler! I did not want to rock the monocultural boat that existed in my school, resulting in my third and final revised problem of practice addressing the paucity of minority representation in high school English curriculum accompanied by the presence of colormuteness within those same classroom walls. Recognizing my own overwhelming sense of fear of engaging in racial and social discourse with my students, I decided to focus on the existence of this phenomenon within the classrooms of my English department. My purpose was twofold: to equip myself with the knowledge and tools to feel comfortable enough to engage in these conversations with my students, thereby enacting my social justice agency, and to influence my colleagues and their levels of awareness, thereby enacting their social justice agency. Moreover, I hoped our collective growth toward critical consciousness and inclusivity would have rippling effects on our students and their social justice agency.
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> Jason: My day job as Mr. Sox, a White male educator teaching AP Chemistry was in stark contrast to my other role as Jason, a burgeoning student of social activism working to improve his cultural competency. When the time came to choose a problem of practice for my dissertation, I longed for an opportunity to reunite my fractured identities. I sought to create a classroom that would transform my students' approach to science and be more inclusive of their lived experiences. While examining the experiences of my students, I simultaneously considered my own experiences teaching a more culturally and socially relevant curriculum. All the planning could not prepare me for the anxiety and fear I experienced leading up to our first lesson. While I had plenty of literature supporting my cause, if I had been challenged by a student on why we were spending classroom time on content that was not expressly written as part of AP curriculum, I might have called out for a sick day. Instead of being challenged by my students, I discovered they, in fact, expect teachers to actually see and appreciate their individual identities. A one-size-fits-all approach of teaching was not good enough for them. When discussing culturally relevant themes in our first unit, I discovered my students were more socially mindful than I ever thought possible. The desire to share their experiences with one another encouraged and inspired me to share what I was learning as their teacher. In this way, we forged relationships together and created a classroom environment built upon respect for one another. I would be lying if I told you that every lesson was successful, but I realized I was not swimming in the deep end alone. As an educator of nearly two decades, I had never felt so connected with a group of students, and I am convinced it had nothing to do with the standards in my AP curriculum.

Individuals can find personal fulfillment and a sense of purpose through introspection and activism, but it requires active pursuit and adaptability as new knowledge, circumstances, and growth occur. For educators, this means not only reflecting on our own privilege but also integrating social justice principles into our teaching practices and pedagogies. Teaching with a social justice lens required us to challenge inequities not only within our classroom walls, but also within ourselves. Navigating this complex interplay between personal growth and professional responsibility led us to new discoveries and contributed to a broader social transformation in the immediate spheres around us. Not to be left out, these insights and practices also permeated our roles and identities as parents.

## As Parents

As a category of social justice activism, parenting involves more than just raising decent human beings. As Dr. Traci Baxley explained:

> The difference between raising good people and raising socially aware or pro-justice children is really this idea of 'good people' is almost passive. We want to raise people who do no harm, people who are kind, which is great, but it's really the low bar. We really want to raise kids who not only do no harm, but who can intercede when harm is done. So the action piece. Not just car[ing] about people, but car[ing] with action. (Anderson, 2021, 11:40)

As our own identities and awareness changed, we felt an increasing weight of responsibility to educate our children toward this justice-oriented mindset as well. Instead of shifting to individual italics, we tell this story together as it involves a conversation we were both a part of and is indicative of the type of conversations we are attempting to have with our children:

> One afternoon, in the spring of 2023 (i.e., the final stage of our EdD program), as we were pulling away from our kids' elementary school and asking about their day, our son asked, point-blank: 'Why are all the janitors brown?' And thus, we were ushered into a new realm of social justice parenting where we had to determine if we were going to do more than just write about our advocacy. We can tell you that prior to our transformation, we would have responded by framing it as

> coincidence, but in that car on that crisp afternoon, we moved past any fear or doubt, and we explained to our son, as best we could without any rule books, how the world is not fair and sometimes fairness is based on the color of your skin—that some judgements and decisions and systems keep it unfair, but that doesn't make them right, and we should always try to make things right and fair for everyone. Was it the right answer? There's no way of knowing. But that conversation prompted more questions, which prompted more honest answers, which prompted more questions, which prompted an open discussion for our family now as it concerns race.

Family conversations about race and racism are not easy. They can seem uncomfortable, questionable in age-appropriateness, and even unsettling as they can reopen our own uncertainties, ignorance, and predispositions (Bradt & Berkfield, 2021). However, the only way of getting it wrong is by not doing it altogether (Anderson, 2021).

## OUR COMMITMENT

Our discovery and transformation fueled the need to embrace our positions in our school environment and enact social justice activism. With this, we became emboldened to use our agency as a source of justice:

> To create learning experiences that acknowledge and celebrate individuals and the vast array of experiences and diversity that they bring…[to] complicate if not disrupt systems of inequity…[to] teach with the hope to create a system of human teaching committed to social justice agendas and not just merely rhetorical lip service. (Sanjakdar & Premier, 2023, p. 5)

Teaching in this way requires both a practical and theoretical approach (Freire, 1970), being conscious of your personal background, positionality, and biases before defining 'teaching for social justice' for yourself in order to then put it into practice for students (Lee, 2011). This process, however, is easier said than done:

> When the term *social justice* is applied to classroom contexts that are multidimensional and unpredictable, the practice of teaching for social justice becomes complex. Teachers encounter contested values, beliefs, and behaviors of their students that they may or may not recognize and accept. (Lee, 2011, p. 2)

There are naysayers who question the validity of contributing to already overloaded curriculums (Sanjakdar & Premier, 2023), and critical voices who equate the pursuit of social justice education to a stage for teachers to scatter their personal, political agendas (Lingard et al., 2014). The social justice scales sometimes seem stacked against us; choosing social justice is getting harder—but we suggest this challenge also underscores its importance, even necessity in the classroom. DiAnna explains:

> Our State Department of Education just passed a new proviso requiring classroom libraries to be logged and accessible to the public to enable challenges to the titles on our bookshelves (State Board of Education, 2023), making it harder for teachers to supply books and for students to receive them. In the face of threatening book bans, censorship, and viable opportunities to be the next teacher on the evening news, the easy choice is to ignore, to empty bookshelves, to omit, to abandon. Yet, doing so is judiciously, morally, and ethically wrong. Our job as social justice activists, as agents of change, is to make right what is wrong. We must stand resolutely against these repressive measures, advocating for the voices and stories that have historically been silenced. By curating diverse and inclusive curricula, we empower our students to engage critically with the world around them and to challenge oppressive narratives. It is our responsibility to foster a culture of openness and inquiry, ensuring that every book, every story, every voice, remains a bridge to understanding, empathy, and social justice.

There is an overwhelming dearth of scholarship addressing the ease of navigating the road toward social justice—whether it is teaching for, parenting for, or advocating for social justice. No one will tell you the process is easy, but neither is it impossible. There is, in fact, scholarship that supports walking the road to social justice alongside critical friends (Lindsey et al., 2009; Loughran & Brubaker, 2015; Ward, 2013), making the burden of transformation somewhat lighter. With the support of critically mindful professors alongside a cohort of blossoming social justice advocates, we exited the program with not only our anticipated degree, but also a newfound purpose and need to embrace our agency within our school and become activists for change. Jason elaborates:

> We are currently in the year of the Summer Olympics and our family has been riveted to the television cheering for Team U.S.A. In the spirit of inclusivity, we have also been watching the Paralympic games, and one event especially resonated. For track and field events, visually impaired athletes can choose to run with a guide who is often tethered to the athlete, making it easier for them to stay in their lane and avoid collisions with other athletes. These running guides must be in perfect tandem with their athletes, as any misstep, either too fast or too slow, could hinder their progress. As I watched the event unfold on the television, I could not help but recognize the athletes' dependency on their guides during the race was similar to the dependency I had for others to lead me through my pursuit of social justice and equity. I was blind to the things around me, and I needed individuals with a more comprehensive vision to come alongside and steer me in my journey. My specific guides changed throughout the EdD program, yet I was consistently running alongside someone who matched me step for step and encouraged me to take the next step forward.

Our challenge to others is to find someone to run alongside you in your own journey. Even though we shared similar positionalities, having someone who understood our experiences was vital. In the way of iron sharpening iron (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Proverbs 27:17), our partnership provided a system of checks and balances of our privileges, served as a safe place to ask questions, and offered a supportive voice when feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed by fear. In finding a critical ally, you participate in a relationship that will not only support your own growth but also provides you with opportunities to be a guide to someone else. In partnerships forged through mutual learning and tempered through challenges, we create positive change effects that ripple into our communities, "no longer accepting things that we cannot change but changing things we cannot accept" (Davis, 1981, p. 54).

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