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Tyrone and Vivian Brown: A person-in-environment retrospective

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Abstract

I, like most of my family, never valued pictures, documents and artifacts from the past. Whether they were placed in a cheap photo album or simply cast away in a box, their value went unknown. This project is an attempt to make up for lost time by archiving. Archiving pertains to the preserving and storing of documents or records relating to the activities, business dealings, etc., of a person, family, corporation, association, community, or nation (Archiving, 2012). As I chronicled the lives of my wife and me, many memories were re-discovered. I inserted valuable photos, documents and personal correspondence. This project also serves to educate the reader about how we attained our values and morals and who were the driving forces behind them. It is my wish to convey these memories to my grandchildren as well as instill in them the value of archiving. I hope I have spurred those that peruse this work to archive their own history. Vivian Brown and I have seen many sights in our lives. During our lifetime, we have observed an ongoing fight for racial rights as well as the assassination of a President and a Pacifist. We witnessed a city set on fire (Detroit); a city saturated by water (New Orleans) and a city assaulted by terror (New York). It was my attempt to bring to life the things that were most important in our lives as children, parents and eventually grandparents. I traced our lives to the best of my ability and make reference to where we lived, where we learned and where our hearts lie.

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TYRONE AND VIVIAN BROWN
A PERSON-IN-ENVIRONMENT RETROSPECTIVE

By

Tyrone Brown

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Tyrone and Vivian Brown

A Person-In-Environment Retrospective



New Orleans

2001

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my mentor, Dr. Betty Brown-Chappell, who took me under her wing and kept me safe and warm. Her advice, accessibility and words of wisdom will always be appreciated. I would further like to thank my mother and father, Emory and Marion Brown as well as my wife's mother, Ms. Pecolia Fishten for providing inspiration to me in my times of need, may they rest in peace. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Vivian Marie Fishten Brown, for all the love, support and encouragement she has bestowed upon me over the past twenty eight years. This work could not have been accomplished without you.

Abstract

I, like most of my family, never valued pictures, documents and artifacts from the past. Whether they were placed in a cheap photo album or simply cast away in a box, their value went unknown. This project is an attempt to make up for lost time by archiving. Archiving pertains to the preserving and storing of documents or records relating to the activities, business dealings, etc., of a person, family, corporation, association, community, or nation (Archiving, 2012). As I chronicled the lives of my wife and me, many memories were re-discovered. I inserted valuable photos, documents and personal correspondence. This project also serves to educate the reader about how we attained our values and morals and who were the driving forces behind them. It is my wish to convey these memories to my grandchildren as well as instill in them the value of archiving. I hope I have spurred those that peruse this work to archive their own history. Vivian Brown and I have seen many sights in our lives. During our lifetime, we have observed an ongoing fight for racial rights as well as the assassination of a President and a Pacifist. We witnessed a city set on fire (Detroit); a city saturated by water (New Orleans) and a city assaulted by terror (New York). It was my attempt to bring to life the things that were most important in our lives as children, parents and eventually grandparents. I traced our lives to the best of my ability and make reference to where we lived, where we learned and where our hearts lie.

Introduction

What started as a simple gift of love to our grandchildren from Vivian and me, gave rise to a *person-in-environment* retrospective of our lives, separately and together. The person-in-environment approach views the individual and his or her multiple environments as a dynamic, interactive system, in which each component simultaneously affects and is affected by the other (Hare, 2004). This project includes facts, figures, pictures and documents that have importance, not only to our family, but to the general public at large. A timeline of local, national and personal events was utilized to give the reader a sense of the times in which we lived. This timeline chronicles political changes both locally and nationally, historic gains made by African Americans and most notably, births; deaths and other significant events that occurred in our lives. This timeline will also illustrate our love for sports and music. Timelines of our homes lived in and schools attended are furnished to allow the reader to track our whereabouts, both geographically and academically.

It is my hope that this collection will inspire other individuals to create a chronicle of their lives and the lives of those whom they hold dear. This work attempts to serve as an archive, a legacy and finally a tribute to those who came before me and those who will come after. This study is to present the life of Tyrone and Vivian Brown in correlation with the social work perspective, person in environment. It is my belief that everything in our environment affects the individual, whether it is a person, place, thing or event; it helps to shape our opinions, our interests, our activities and thus our lives. The point of these assembled pieces is to get an understanding of the times in which we lived and their effects upon us. In observing said events, the reader, may be evoked to put our

experiences into a life course context that would be similar to their own. This concept is referred to as “thick description.” Thick description refers to the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context (Ponterotto, 2006).

Methodology

While sitting in a social work class being taught by Dr. Betty Brown-Chappell, I became fascinated with her ongoing project of documenting and archiving her life. The culmination of our many talks gave birth to a project I would present, through a person in environment perspective, a historical, chronological trek of our lives from our births to the present. This is a research process also known as “ethnography.” Ethnographic research explores different aspects of culture through examining the environments, activities and interactions of participants (Daniel, 2009).

I began gathering any and all photos I had on hand, labeling them and categorizing them by year. I did the same with photos of Vivian and her family. I attempted to have at least one picture of each of us, for each year of our lives. This would present a minor problem in that, like many African American families, we had not taken care of a great number of these photos. I solicited photos from family members on both sides to make up for photos in the years we were lacking. I also gathered important documents such as birth certificates, diplomas and awards to augment the project. Dr. Brown-Chappell and her husband, Michael, taught me the importance of handling these photos and documents with gloves in order to prevent skin oils from harming them. The Chappells gave me archival quality storage materials for the original items, and I digitally reproduced them for use in my project. The Chappells also gave me the understanding of how photographs

and paper documents can be harmed by light, skin oils, temperature and pollutants. I would be remiss by not mentioning that I do not consider myself a professional archivist, this is an art that takes many years of study. I have merely taken what I have learned and tried to apply it.

I then created three timelines that span from the time of the 1950's to the present: one for local, national events and personal events (Appendix II) and one each to chronicle the homes lived in and schools attended by Vivian and me (Appendixes IV and VI), respectively. Photographs and documents pertaining to Vivian's life (Appendix III) and my life (Appendix V) were then added.

Purpose of Study

If one were to examine our life courses, our individual characteristics and environmental circumstances, it might be difficult to conceive our union. But I think the term "opposites attract" suits us best. Vivian was a black female, raised by a single parent in poverty in the south. I was a black male, raised by both parents in a middle class situation in the north. I believe Vivian's upbringing endowed her with the toughness necessary to weather hard times, teenage pregnancy and the death of those dear to her. Being light skinned and of small stature, she was routinely accosted by those within the black community that felt her physical attributes equaled weakness. I, on the other hand, faced different tests. Being a dark skinned, large black male made a target of those who wanted to challenge my manhood as well as my intellect. I learned at an early age that my calmness would serve me well when facing these situations. Together, our attributes have allowed us to navigate life's pressures, either with toughness or with calmness.

Vivian readily admits that she grew up in extreme poverty, but one would never know it by looking at the photographs of her childhood, which project images of an extremely happy person. Her photos depict a woman with a will that was stronger than her woes and whose resolve proved to be bigger than her regrets. “We had some rough times because we were quite poor and moved a lot. We were forced to change schools a lot, sometimes we would protest about the school change. We would have to walk several miles to get to school, winter, spring, summer or fall. It was a rough childhood financially but it was a very happy childhood because we were very close” (V. Brown, personal communication, April 23, 2012).

One of the stories Vivian tells is how she was forced to walk to Wayne County Community College from her home; a walk of at least three miles, to attend nursing classes. She tells of walking through blazing heat in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. All thoughts of quitting or turning back vanquished with the realization of the life she wanted to secure for her daughter Pecolia.

My initial desire was to create a work that Vivian and I could pass along to our grandchildren, who through no fault of our own or theirs, have become estranged. This has evolved into a challenge to those in a similar situation to present their lives in archival form to their posterior. This will serve simultaneously as a roadmap through history as well as a glimpse into how life makes us what we are as well as who we are.

When one takes a look back at his /her life and times, a startling realization comes to mind. Just as we lived within those times, the events of those times live within us. They help to shape the person we have become. Person-In-Environment also takes into consideration an individual’s biological traits such as gender, race, temperament and

areas privy to the individual. Though this project is primarily a look into the lives of Tyrone and Vivian Fishten Brown; it also serves to give the reader a sense of the history that took place post 1950's.

Tyrone Emory Brown was born in 1957 to Emory H. Brown and Marion (nee Coffey) Brown in Detroit. I was the youngest of five children (one deceased) and the only male child. Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, my mother and father, who married in 1940, moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1947 to take advantage of the abundant factory jobs that attracted many from the south. My family lived on Marquette St. in Detroit as my father secured a job as a laborer at Chrysler Motors and my mother stood by his side as a homemaker. They had five children while on Marquette St.: Delores, Dalaris (deceased); Jean; Sandra and me. Meanwhile, 743 miles south of Detroit, Vivian Marie Fishten was born to Pecolia (nee Johnson) Fishten and Earl Fishten, the year was 1958. Vivian was also the youngest of five children: Julian; Lynette; Larry; Zefferine and herself. She moved to Detroit at an early age with her family and resided on Detroit's east side. Her mother Pecolia, worked as a cook and cab driver.

During our late teens and young adulthood we like other black people were yearned for long-overdue respect and dignity. From Martin Luther King Jr. who spearheading the civil rights movement to singer, James Brown who proclaimed "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud," the thoughts and emotions of African Americans were being directed toward education and empowerment. We had experienced the monikers "Nigga," "Colored," and "Negro." Now we proudly considered ourselves as being Black. These events speak to the heart of the person in environment perspective, as their effects on my

life intertwined with teachings from my family and help instill in me my passion for African-American pride.

These were very important times (1959 to 1970) for Vivian and me; we as children were directly affected by our changing environment. What we heard and observed during this period of time has had a major impact on who we are and how we think as adults. One event that transpired early on in our lives was the founding of Motown Records by Detroit's Berry Gordy in 1959. The music his company produced would go on to influence not only Vivian and me, but music lovers around the world for over fifty years. As the 1970's rolled around and Vivian and I grew to be teenagers, we were both in the throes of the black power era. Locally, Coleman A. Young became Detroit's first African American Mayor and Erma Henderson became Detroit's first female African American on the City Council. The election of Mayor Young signaled a turning point in the City of Detroit. Me, like many other black people in the city felt we finally had a voice to represent us. Personally I was being influenced by the influx of "Blacksploitation" films while Vivian was heavily into the musical sounds being emitted by Motown. I initially attended Cass Technical High School and went on graduate from Central High School in 1975. Vivian attended Martin Luther King Jr. High School and graduated the same year.

In 1976, I attended a party given by a friend, who unbeknownst to me had invited a female friend of hers. That female friend's name was Vivian Marie Fishten and she brought with her a newborn baby named Pecolia Carita Fishten. I held Pecolia in my arms, fed her and relished in being a father figure, even if only for an hour or so. I did not see or talk to Vivian or Pecolia for eight years. No one could have predicted that there

would be a “lag time” of nine years, and in 1985 Vivian would be my wife and Pecolia would be my daughter.

It was this “lag time” period that really cemented what we believed and what we became. Vivian attended Wayne County Community College and attained an Associate’s Degree in Nursing; I attended Detroit Institute of Technology/Wayne State University and later attended Control Data Computer School. Vivian went on to become a licensed registered nurse, while I secured employment as a computer technician and eventually moved to Chicago. This proved to be a very exciting period in our lives and those within the country with the election of Jimmy Carter (D) and Ronald Reagan (R) as Presidents of the United States. Both went on to have pivotal roles in the growth of the country. Jimmy Carter guided the United States toward needed energy conservation regulations. Ronald Reagan’s economic policies gave the country some of the lowest inflation and unemployment rates the ever experienced. Another event that defined this period was African American baseball player Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth’s home run record.

Vivian and I became reacquainted in 1984 and got married in 1985. We eloped to Toledo, Ohio and were married by Reverend Triplett on the Toledo Courthouse steps with little Pecolia standing by our sides serving as witness. Eloping to Toledo seemed to be popular with many couples from the Detroit area at that time. Vivian and I started our lives together in a one-bedroom apartment located above my parents’ first floor home on Clements St. in Detroit. Pecolia, who had been living with Vivian’s’ mother since our marriage, moved in with us a year later. It was then that I realized how important my own mother and father were, as the morals and values I tried to pass on to Pecolia were directly attributed to the ones they raised me with. Vivian, who had parental experience

prior to our marriage, had done a great job raising Pecolia as she was always a: polite; well spoken; mannerable and loved child. “It was funny because I knew right away this kid; this baby looked just like me. I didn’t have a lot of baby pictures but I could look at her and see myself” (V. Brown, personal communication, April 23, 2012). Vivian’s mother, also named Pecolia, had instilled in Vivian, all of the same qualities.

Vivian and I both were raised by good families, which I define as those believing in hard work, teaching their children good morals and charitable values. This gave us the impetus to start our own family. Vivian and I, after being married for three years and already forming a family unit with our daughter Pecolia, were overjoyed with the news that a new baby would soon be added to our own family. Tai Marie Brown blessed our lives with her birth at St. John Macomb Hospital in Warren, MI on November 11, 1988. This being the case, we knew that we would need more room than our small apartment could afford us. This precipitated our move to 674 Algonquin on the eastside of Detroit. There we stayed for the next fourteen years.

While these were very exciting years for our immediate family, they were also exciting for the world around us. As sports fans we celebrated the Detroit Pistons and Detroit Red Wings national championships in their respective sports. The videotaped beating of African American Rodney King by White Los Angeles policemen in 1991, brought to light inequalities in race and criminal justice. This event gave many Black people, including myself, the sense that our lives were not valued and that a crime against us was not really a crime. We beamed with pride when our oldest daughter Pecolia graduated from Cass Technical High School in 1993. Detroit elected its second consecutive African American mayor, Dennis Archer, in 1994 and the United States had

to live through one of its darkest time with the attacks on New York's World Trade Centers in 2001. The election of Dennis Archer cemented the fact that we as Black Detroiters had the ability to control our political destiny. The attacks on the World Trade Center buildings gave our country a collective sense of vulnerability, but also brought patriotism to an all time high. Americans, regardless of race, suffered great losses and realized that we had to band together against our common enemies.

It was also during these years that Vivian and I would experience the death of our parents. The death of my parents, five years apart, has haunted me to this day. I've always felt I could have been a better son to them, but life never seems to give you a second chance. Vivian served as a caregiver to her grandmother, and eventually her mother as well. Their deaths had a similar impact on her. "The saddest moments of my life would have to be losing my grandmother and losing my mother because I was so not ready to lose them. Even though you know life is not permanent, I lived in a world of denial. I thought they would be there forever and even after I lost my grandmother; I allowed myself to think that my mother would be here forever" (V. Brown, personal communication, April 23, 2012).

The social work concept of person-in-environment should not be looked upon lightly because it may be the one concept that all individuals experience simultaneously. This being the case, it was important to Vivian and me to surround our children with as many positive influences as possible. This runs the gamut from the foods they ate, to the movies they observed and the people we allowed them to associate with. Children will eventually gravitate toward those people, places and things they find pleasurable, but we felt it was necessary to lay down a moral foundation for them to stand on. We were aided

in our efforts by our respective families who held the same values in high esteem. Vivian and I always emphasized strong work ethics, providing love and care to our children and instilling self-discipline and respect for self and others.

Another joyous occasion in our lives occurred with the birth of our grandchildren, Chevon and Kawan Adams, born to our oldest daughter, Pecolia in 1997 and 2004, respectively. Vivian and I relished in the roles of grandparents. We babysat at every opportunity and even suggested Pecolia take vacations so that we could do so.

Vivian continued her nursing career and worked primarily as a psychiatric nurse at Riverview Hospital in Detroit from 1989 to 2006. I eventually moved away from the computer industry into real estate appraisal and worked with Priority and Heritage Appraisal Companies. I would eventually go on to own my own appraisal company (Metro Appraisal LLC). Vivian fancied herself a “workhorse” and would work seven days a week while I might put in up to eighty hours myself. This is an important fact to know as I believe it serves as a testament to our parents’ work intensive regimen as well as serving as a blueprint for our own daughters. This work ethic enabled Vivian and me to relocate to the suburb of Farmington Hills in 2002. This also served as another example to our children that hard work and determination would be the key to living the life they desired. Although Pecolia had already left the nest to make a life for herself, Tai thrived in her new environment. She saw Farmington Hills as a wonderland, different from Detroit in so many ways. Tai was overjoyed at the move and did not seem to miss living in Detroit at all, in other words, she loved it. From attending a school that had a grassy landscape, to having a convenience store within walking distance, Tai took to the suburban life like a duck to water, as we all did.

As the years went on, an event was unfolding before our eyes, one that would alter history as we knew it. A young Senator from Chicago would run for President of the United States and forever convert the phrase “No I can’t” to “Yes I can” and give it prominence in the lexicon of African American language. Barack Obama: enthusiastic; educated; eloquent and eager for change would be elected as America’s forty-fourth President (Appendix II) and assume office in 2009; an occurrence that I never imagined would happen in my wildest dream. Being not far removed from the lynching of black men in the south to the Civil Rights Movement, to James Brown proclaiming “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud,” the election of a black man to this position was difficult to fathom. President Obama had to overcome prejudice from the right wing as well as some from the left wing. His every word was scrutinized and even his United States citizenry was challenged. But through it all he persevered with “guts”, determination and the love of his family to help him face the political firestorm. This monumental event truly allowed me and other Black parents the luxury of exhaling while telling our children that they could indeed be President when they grew up.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the real estate market in Michigan turned our lives upside down. I would be forced to: watch my business dissolve; stand by as my vehicles were repossessed and feel the embarrassment of having my home foreclosed. Vivian stood strong and took on the role of “breadwinner” for which I applaud her. Again, we were being presented with an opportunity to pass on a life lesson to our children. A statement I recently heard “you don’t drown by falling into the water; you drown by staying in it” (Barbara Thacker, personal communication, June 5, 2012) comes to mind. I chose to get out of the water. With Vivian holding down the fort, I went on to attain an Associate’s

Degree from Oakland County Community College (Summa Cum Laude) and enrolled in Eastern Michigan University (EMU). I will graduate in August 2012 with a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work and have been accepted into EMU's Graduate School to pursue a Master's Degree.

Looking back on our lives, there have been many highs and lows such as our marriage: The births and childhoods of Pecolia and Tai Marie; and the death of parents. Simultaneously, we have witnessed local and national triumphs by African Americans as well as the insidiousness of overt and covert racism. Through it all, with all we have gone through in these years; we have experienced them together. Thirty-six years have passed since Vivian and I first met. Now I am a student at Eastern Michigan University, Vivian is a psychiatric nurse and this project is our lives, our legacy, to be passed on to Chevon and Kawan, our grandchildren.

Limitations

The acquisition of pictures and documents proved to be a difficult task. I found that I did not have many pictures of Vivian and me and I was forced to rely on the charities of relatives, who in most cases did not have many photos of us as well. This serves as a wake-up call to other families to cherish said pictures and documents and keep them well preserved. Some of the photos in this project were worn or faded. I chose to keep them this way, rather than alter them with new technology. Timeline dates, facts and figures have been taken from the most reliable resources available. Other limitations are due to time constraints. This research about two individuals whose lives spanned (1957-present) cannot be generalized to others, but can provide preliminary information for future researchers to pursue the lives of contemporary African American couples and families using the person-in-environment framework.

Conclusions and Implications

It has to be mentioned that this project is but a glimpse into the life of two people and that our lives together mirror that of many African Americans. Coming from humble beginnings, striving for a better existence and overcoming hardships are the things that make this life worth living. This is the point that I am trying to convey to my grandchildren. Our environment is made up of many factors, factors that cause intersection, interaction and introspection. A chance meeting became the catalyst that created a marriage, an adoption, a birth and the intertwining of two consciences into one. Vivian and I grew up in a time when African Americans were in transitions concerning how they wanted to be seen and treated, and for us this equates to fighting for dignity. As the old adage goes “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger;” this saying sums up how we lived our lives. We tried to cushion the blows of local, national and global punches and still hold our heads up and keep our eyes on the prize.

What became apparent to me while putting this project together is that we truly are just passing through life. My children and I have experienced places, things and events that will forever have a lasting effect on us. These experiences help shape and mold us into the people we are, and they help explain to posterity what we went through and what they can expect to go through. Learning about the process of archiving and its value has become of utmost importance to me. If family members that came before Vivian and me had known of its importance, it would have certainly made it easier for us to find out who we are and from whence we came. More importantly is, that we have made an effort to pass on what we do know about ourselves, and now our grandchildren also will know.

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