

## **“The Refinement of a Country Bumpkin” by Dylan Walton**

Growing up in the deep south, I know a thing or two about hospitality and kindness. Learning to respect our elders is at the very core of our culture. Which is probably why on the first day of practice when Mr. LaFrance, my 54 year old high school speech and debate coach, asked me to stand up and introduce myself, I was just a tad bit startled when he abruptly stopped me and told me to stop acting like a “bumbling inarticulate Texan country bumpkin.” I mean, my only intention for joining the team was to find something to do after school everyday, not to be criticized on my very first day of practice. I stood startled by his off putting remarks, unable to comprehend how I was supposed to react in this situation. He was supposed to be my coach, yet he had just very blatantly, and publicly might I add, insulted me and he didn’t even know who I was. He however, took immediate control of the situation and reassured me not to worry, that he’d be able to “fix me.” I sat down, partly because he was an authority figure and I owed him my respect, but also due to the fact that I was more than a little frazzled by the entire exchange. Where did he get off calling me a country bumpkin?

The way I spoke was never something I ever truly thought about. I grew up in a community where almost everyone I ever encountered on a daily basis spoke in what many would consider to be “black english” or “ebonics.” I grew up with the impression that white people “spoke better” and whenever I did encounter a white person, even if they were someone around my age, I always made sure to speak slowly and overemphasize my words, because I knew from past experience that they generally had trouble understanding how people like me spoke. It always felt extraordinarily odd and unnatural to speak in this manner, and I dreaded having to do it to even achieve the basic levels of communication. I found myself more often than not keeping quiet whenever situations like this arose, in a way being intimidated into silence due to both this discourse barrier between us as well as the general disparity between our social standings in society. However, what I remember most from this time was how annoyed I was that I had to work twice as hard to make sure they understood what I was saying, even though I had already trained myself to comprehend the way they spoke the same language. I was doing twice the work they were doing to attempt to communicate with them, a venture that more often than not ended with a mutual understanding that we were never going to fully understand each other.

It was through experiences like this that I continued to surround myself with others who spoke just like me. It was just easier that way. A surprising number of schools in New Orleans are still informally racially segregated, where white parents know where not to send their kids to schools and black parents know where their kids will be around more kids like them, so since I attended an all black

private school, I did not grow up with any friends who did not speak the way I did. To be honest, none of this seemed out of place to me. This was my norm and I accepted it. All of this changed permanently August of 2005.

Like most of the residents from New Orleans, I left the place I called home in a sudden frenzy due to the natural onslaught onto the Gulf Coast that was Hurricane Katrina. My family and I evacuated to Houston, Texas and lived there for the next five years. During this time I attended a multiculturally integrated public school for the first time. The first day of class, I couldn't understand a word most of my peers said, and I am sure they were under the same impression when they meant the strange refugee that couldn't even pronounce the word articulation. There were students of all different cultures and backgrounds, who each spoke different facets of the English language, from Spanglish to a Texas drawl. What was unique about this experience was that even though there were many different discourse communities represented throughout the classroom, we were all still able to communicate with one another. In the past, I had been isolated with only members of my own or similar discourse community, I had never known how to maintain extended contact with people who didn't communicate in the same manner as I did. This provided an opportunity for me to learn about different walks of life in an educational environment where I could interact with new people while still maintaining my own cultural identity. I still spoke in the same Ebonics vernacular I did before, but my new interactions with my fellow classmates expanded my language capabilities and morphed it into a tongue that my debate coach, Mr. Kenneth LaFrance, would one day describe as "backwoods country talk."

I remember in the first speech I had to give at a competition, I had to say the word "regime." To most people, that probably doesn't seem like such a big deal, but trust me, to me this was one of the toughest challenges that I have ever been faced with. When I first gave this address, I stumbled and fumbled over that word every single time. There was no real reason besides the fact that this word wasn't apart of my normal vernacular. I mean sure, I had read it before, but to speak it? Never. At best I could get out a gargled "rej-eh-meh," which looks as pleasant as it sounded. To me and all the many worlds I had come from, words like "regime," were quite literally something of a foreign language, but have no fear, because Mr. LaFrance was there to make me all better. He put me through speaking drills, tongue twisters, and practice rounds to hone these skills. Articulation and effective argumentation became a cornerstone of my high school education.

For months I forced myself to over-articulate every single syllable in every single word just so my mouth would get used to the feeling of "talking proper." Mr. LaFrance wasn't alone in the opinion

that my communication skills needed work in order to be taken seriously by a broader community. After every unsuccessful bout at each speech and debate tournament, my ballots would always come in with copious suggestions for improvements from my various judges. Within time, the negative rankings turned positive just as I learned to effectively “speak right,” or as some of my black friends referred to it as “speaking white.” I became a master of code switching between my two communities, able to seamlessly alternate my how I spoke to fit each given situation. I could slip in words like “trife” or “salty” into everyday conversation and then easily engage in “intellectual articulate discussion” in a debate round right after.

Both of these discourse communities were valid modes of communication in my mind, however, this caused me to drift in between both social groups rather than be apart of either completely. I’ve encountered many members of the black community who consider forsaking ebonics in favor “the white man’s language” to be abandoning one’s culture for the mainstream. This has set me apart from many of my black peers as being “too white” for them. However, in a different manner, just as I was when I was a child, I still find myself avoiding slipping into ebonics around most white people, because of the strain it causes on communication and how occasionally it evokes negative connotations as to what ebonics implies about one’s education or character. This has set me apart from many of my white peers as being “too black” for them. It still astounds me that even though I have put considerable effort into being able to traverse between various discourse communities, when these communities come into conflict with one another just having the ability to code-switch does not erase the dissonance created as one would hope. However, I am still proud of my new found ability to be able to code switch and the experiences that led me to reach this skill. It gave me the eyeopening experience of learning how other individuals view the world and interact with it and how it contrasts so greatly with my own life story. My own personal journey in learning to appreciate literacy, language, and communication allows me to be both more accepting about the differences of others and more adaptable in how I control how I am able to communicate with the world, and I couldn’t have done any of it without the help of Mr. Kenneth Michael LaFrance. To this day, he remains a close mentor and a closer friend, which is more than I could ever ask for and something I will always be grateful for. However, as much as Mr. LaFrance likes to think he “fixed me, I look back and I don’t really think I was ever truly broken in the first place, yet I will admit, that he was a catalyst into me learning how to utilize the tools of language and speech that remain essential to every facet of my livelihood, but there is more to me than learning how to properly

pronounce the word regime. Even though I may be refined now, I know that I will always honor my country bumpkin heart and all the color that comes with it.