

# Growing Up with Racism

Shirley Lewis

## Whites Only

In the 1960s, I visited my grandmother and cousins in Arkansas. One Saturday morning some of us decided to go downtown to see a movie. I felt like the big-shot girl from the city having fun with my cousins from the country, and I was so excited as we entered the theater.

After getting our tickets, I automatically ran down to the front to get our seats. My cousins didn't come with me, so I stood up and looked for them. To my surprise, the usher approached me.

---

**With tears in my eyes, I went to the balcony, which was the only place blacks were allowed to sit.**

---

He was a large man, wearing a uniform, and he said, "You cannot sit here." I was stunned, and I said "Why?" Then I saw my cousins beckoning me to come back, but I refused. I had not

experienced this kind of thing in my hometown of Kansas City, so I said, "I'm from Kansas City." The usher's face turned very red. The look on his face scared me, so I decided to join my cousins. With tears in my eyes, I went with them to the balcony, which was the only place that blacks were allowed to sit. I was eight years old when this happened, and I have never forgotten that awful experience.

## Light vs. Dark in My Own Family

To my great surprise, I was exposed to racism in my own family. Back then, if your skin was darker and your hair was shorter, people thought you were less worthy than your counterparts. Girls who had fairer complexions and long hair were treated better, even within their own families. For example, since I was the darker skinned girl, I was usually the one who was asked to wash dishes or

clean up, while the other girls just had to look pretty. Due to this treatment, I spent many years feeling that I didn't deserve better. I did some very extreme things to feel pretty and accepted, such as bringing gifts every time I visited a friend because I didn't feel like I was good enough on my own. I would also ask my friends' parents if they needed help cleaning up. I felt like I needed to perform some act of service to be considered a worthwhile individual and to be accepted by others.

As I grew older, I gained more confidence, and now I am very proud of my personal appearance. In my 20s, while I was married, a friend invited me to a fashion show and I was overwhelmed with the models who were all shapes, sizes, and colors. Soon after, I started attending a modeling school because I thought if all of these girls can model, so could I. My husband did not approve of me joining the school, but he became very proud of me and my accomplishments. This experience helped change my attitude about myself and I gained more confidence in myself and my appearance.

## Racial Tension at School

I went to an all-black school until eighth grade, and then I switched to a predominately white school. I was the only black eighth-grader. The white students were not nice to me. They were not



used to going to school with black students. As a result, I became something of a trouble-maker. I tended not to listen in class, talked back to the teacher, and cracked a lot of jokes.

I was helped by a great teacher, Mrs. James. She was a stern gym teacher, and most of the black students, including me, didn't like her. We disliked her so much, a group of us verbally attacked her one day after school. In my heart, I knew this was wrong, so all of a

sudden, I jumped in front of the other kids and said, "This is wrong! We can't do this!" Mrs. James showed no fear, and everyone backed down.

This made me unpopular with the other kids, but Mrs. James became an advocate for me. She told the other teachers I was a good person and they should give me a chance, in spite of my rude behavior. I became a better, more productive, and nicer student after that. I graduated and was voted

best athlete in my senior year. It made a big difference to have an ally. I need people to believe in me, and Mrs. James showed me how to believe in myself.

*Shirley Lewis is a 65-year old native of Kansas City, MO. After years of working and raising two successful children, she recently decided to focus on herself, so she started taking classes at Literacy KC. She is also a caretaker for her sister, a church member, and an active participant in community organizations.*



*An African-American man goes into the "colored" entrance of a movie theater in Belzoni, Mississippi, 1939. Photo, by Marion Post Wolcott, is in the public domain.*

## Institutional, Internalized, and Interpersonal Racism

**In this article**, the author discusses three different experiences of racism. Look at the definitions below and say which experience goes with which type of racism.

**Institutional racism** is when schools, courts, or private businesses have policies and practices that negatively affect a certain racial group. Unlike the racism perpetrated by individuals, institutional racism has the power to negatively affect *the bulk* of people belonging to a racial group.

**Internalized racism** is when people of color absorb and act on negative messages about themselves.

**Interpersonal racism** is when an individual acts on his/her negative perceptions of another racial group.