

[00:00:04.63] ANTHONY SIS: Welcome to The Inclusive Excellence podcast. Over the past several weeks, we have seen and heard of deadly interactions between black people and police officers in the US and abroad. These violent acts are examples of the systemic racism and discrimination that Black people face simply for being black. Even though race affects every aspect of our lives, depending on our level of awareness, we may or may not hear the experience and perspective of our black colleagues in this moment.

[00:00:39.61] That is why we are launching a special series called "Blackness at Cornell." In this special series, you'll hear the stories of Cornell faculty and staff members in their authentic voice about what it means to be black. We want to recognize the voices and elevate the experiences of our black staff and faculty here at Cornell. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:01:02.79] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:01:04.42] ANTHONY SIS: And you're listening to "Blackness at Cornell."

[00:01:07.23] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:01:33.64] TORAL PATEL: We begin the series with Jeremy Stewart. Here is his story. Just as the quick heads up, the episode contains language that may not be suitable for young listeners.

[00:01:45.35] JEREMY STEWART: Hi, my name is Jeremy Stewart, and I'm the nutrition and health outreach educator for the Cornell University Wellness Program. I want to thank you all for the opportunity for giving me to speak here today. And one thing I want to preface this message with is that I am a black man.

[00:02:03.57] How do I define blackness? With all the negativity surrounding being black, especially in the media today, I want to start out with something positive. And that's how I define my blackness. A few words that come to my mind right away are strong, resilient, powerful, culture, and sacred. That's the way I define blackness.

[00:02:29.58] Unfortunately in this country, blackness and being black means something different. You see, being a black man in this country means at some point early on in your childhood, you go from being a sweet, innocent, black boy to an angry, thug, criminal to society. And it happens in the blink of an eye. Being black in this country means walking into an establishment and having all eyes turn on you, because you're expect either rob or steal something.

[00:02:59.05] Being black in this country means not knowing where you come from, because the only history you have is the last name given to you by your slave master. Then in 2020, you still carry. Being black in America means 400 years of slavery, to segregation and Jim Crow, to now mass incarceration. Being black in America means

struggling every day with mental health. But you can't talk about it, because for us, it's not OK to talk about.

[00:03:26.81] Being Black in America means being pulled over by the police. And even though you may comply and do everything they say, you might not make it out alive. Being black in America means watching your people get murdered and beaten in the streets, while we scream for justice. But we know it will fall on deaf ears. With all that being said, I feel that the best way to describe what it means to be black in America will be to tell my story, because I know that it's not just my story. But it's the story of many other black Americans, and black people, in this country.

[00:04:01.74] I think the best place to start would be with a brief history I know about my family, and how we went from Opelika, Alabama, to upstate New York. My great grandmother was a sharecropper in Alabama. For all you that don't know what sharecropping is and what it was, it's what happened to black people after slavery ended due to us pretty much being refugees of the land. See, a sharecropper is provided land, seeds, tools, clothing, food, which is all deducted from what they harvest at the end of the year.

[00:04:34.26] This puts people in substantial debt to the land owner, especially during a bad year of harvest. So basically, it was just another revised version of slavery. My grandmother would have done the same and was destined for the same life. But after my grandfather who served in World War II couldn't receive VA help in the state of Alabama, because he was a black man, they decided it was time to save all their money and move to somewhere where he could receive the help that he needed.

[00:05:01.88] They first moved to Chicago, which was a hub for black people at that time. And then they moved to Syracuse because of the VA hospital's reputation. My father was born shortly after that in 1958, which was around the time segregation was being outlawed. He says he will never forget the day they integrated the schools up in Syracuse. He said there were people waiting outside the school. And as they pulled up, people yelling, nigger, go back to Africa, was a common phrase.

[00:05:30.14] I never thought that 40 years later I'd be exposed to the same treatment. After going through all that as a child, little did my father know that he would be destined to suffer the biggest form of discrimination in modern form of slavery today, which is mass incarceration. When I was nine years old my father was wrongfully convicted of a very heinous crime. I was there with my father the night they said it all happened.

[00:05:57.50] At the trial, there was no evidence to speak of. But still nonetheless, they convicted him. I'll never forget at the sentencing when they had my father shackled hand to hand with another human being, being marched into the courtroom, much like a slave being transported from plantation to plantation. I listened to the judge call my dad the worst kind of predator who should never be released. 14 years, as she banged the gavel.

[00:06:23.93] I would spend the next five years visiting Attica Correctional Facility. Which as a child, I still remember pulling up on that place for the first time, absolutely terrifying. My dad eventually fought and got released on an appeal for them to recant it, keep a couple of the charges, just so he could join the next statistic of a black man under state supervision, a.k.a. parole.

[00:06:46.79] Meanwhile, amidst all this, my mother, who is a strong white woman, moved us back to the hometown where she grew up to receive help raising my baby sister and me from her parents. The town is Moravia, New York. Moravia is a small, typical upstate New York town that is predominantly white and full of ignorance due to lack of education, culture, et cetera outside of anything they've ever learned in the small little town. There were six black kids in the whole town, and we are still best friends to this day.

[00:07:17.80] Every day was something different, whether it would be dealing with a person put a Confederate flag on our lockers, being called a nigger on a weekly basis, being threatened to be hung on a tree outside of our houses, being stabbed for talking to white women, people riding on our lockers, "go back to Africa, we're niggers," just for the principle to tell us to use a different bathroom. These are just a few examples of what we went through.

[00:07:45.21] On top of all that, being told we were thugs and probably not going to make it out of high school. When you see prison every weekend and you're being told that that's where you'll end up, you start to believe it. But that's why blackness to me means resilience, strong, powerful, because my father, family, and friends all made it out of that situation and changed a lot of people's views while we did it.

[00:08:12.37] With all that's going on in the world today, it has brought me back to where I was as a child. Very angry, and a lot of pain, and hurt. But for every Black person that is listening to this podcast, know that everything you're feeling is warranted. And just like everything else we have been through, we'll get through this, and we'll be stronger for it.

[00:08:37.20] I want to thank Cornell for not only giving me an opportunity to display my talents every day for my job, but to also acknowledge and allow me to be who I am, a black man. Thank you.

[00:08:54.65] TORAL PATEL: Thank you, Jeremy, for sharing your story with us today. Please join us next week to hear another powerful story.

[00:09:03.78] ANTHONY SIS: For more information on how you can contribute to this series, please email us at [ie-academy@cornell.edu](mailto:ie-academy@cornell.edu). My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:09:14.46] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:09:16.05] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for listening to "Blackness at Cornell."

Episode 23: Blackness at Cornell, Part I  
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[00:09:18.90] [MUSIC PLAYING]