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Dr. Wanda Heading-Grant
University of Vermont, wheading@uvm.edu

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Brave and Now Bold

Dr. Wanda Heading-Grant

I was honored to be asked to share my reflections on resilience in higher education with you, but nervous about what I would say. I wondered, if I could be free with my thoughts. I questioned if anyone was ready for what I would say, especially given where I believe my courage comes from. Do I risk sharing my stories because they may be too sad, may not be uplifting enough, or even worse - labeled inappropriate for a publication? And then, I remembered something I heard novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie say in her *TED Talk*, *“The Danger of a Single Story.”* She said, *“Stories make me who I am, but to insist on any of these negative stories alone is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me.”* Perhaps my story can inspire others to see that through my temporary dark journey as a kid, I gained light. It is my hope that student affairs professionals may gain some insight and ideas to add to their toolkits.

I came here from New Jersey, a place filled with diverse people from all walks of life to a place that was regarded as a city but felt more like an oversized town. At the time, the state was predominately white and far less racially and ethnically diverse. I can truly say that at the time of my arrival in the early 80's the state of Vermont was as unfamiliar of me (and my brown skin) as I was not of its homogenous (white) composition. I grew up moderately poor. I experienced domestic violence in my home until age 14. My brothers and I were latchkey kids raised by a single mother who worked tirelessly to support us. At work, my mother experienced both racism and sexism. Despite our circumstances, my mother's tenacity and will to survive allowed her to push forward day after day. It is through this personal lens of adversity and pain that I discovered fortitude, grit, courage, and unconditional love. The harsh reality of my early life had a silver lining. The challenges I faced fueled my desire to become a social worker. My dedication to inclusivity and social justice was motivated by the environments I grew up in and played in as a child. Even then, I knew the community structures and systems where I grew up were less than what they should have been and I, and others, deserved better. I had to find a way to make change happen. I gained both the direction to go forward (not backwards) and hutzpah. As the great poet Maya Angelou said so eloquently, *“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”*

Dr. Wanda Heading-Grant is the Vice President for Human Resources, Diversity, and Multicultural Affairs, and a Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of Vermont. She has been recognized for her dedication to social justice, diversity, inclusion, and equity in the classroom and the workplace.

Today, I am the Vice President for Human Resources, Diversity and Multicultural Affairs at the University of Vermont. I have nearly thirty years of work experience in higher education. I have held a number of different professional positions in higher education including teaching. My collective experiences range from student services and faculty affairs to employee wellness and regulatory and compliance matters in higher education. In my day-to-day life, I practice as an administrator, educator, and activist (because I chose to be those things). I do not practice being a woman, person of color, mother, wife, sister, aunt or a friend (because I am those things). I work hard and sincerely at representing each of these identities. They are interconnected and they make me feel whole, complete, and happy.

There was a time when I believed that chance or providence put me on this path, but I no longer think coincidence or luck paved my way to higher education. After a number of professional situations I believed were tainted with bias, I decided I had to examine my professional road map. I wanted to better prepare myself for the bumps, obstacles and detours in the road that I would encounter. Taking the time to study the landscape around me, and by clarifying my priorities along with my life experiences, I became better at navigating my way into and through the higher education terrain. I knew where and when I needed to make stops for self-care and more fueling of empowerment. I gained wisdom, keenly aware of situations in which there was power in numbers and times when bridging understanding and trust was best done alone. There were times when I sped up my pace, slowed down, or just coasted to achieve my next objective or goal. I have had to take spiritual walks when it seemed like no matter what I did no one could see the importance of respect, civility, integrity, diversity, inclusion, responsibility, innovation, fairness, and equity.

My experience of coming home after school to an empty refrigerator helps me help others now. Watching my mother cry because she could not make rent inspires me to help others today. The memory of her crying because a white man spat in her face because of the color of her skin motivates me to build coalitions against racism and other forms of oppression. My younger brother curling up next to me in bed as my mother begged not to be hit moves me to volunteer to help others who are abused. It is clear to me where I get my fortitude and grit, and how my past has facilitated a passion in me to help others, to pay it forward, to inspire, to push on, but mostly to thrive. My determination/resilience grew out of this darkness, but it no longer lives there nor is it sustained there. I have been able to use those dark situations to be brave, and to become bold and audacious about being a part of creating a better today and tomorrow for all of us.

I hope student affair professionals see that my temporary, albeit difficult, journey as a kid, is one, single story. It is a story I feel blessed to have survived. It has

provided a bright light in my life and work where there could have been darkness. We all have a journey filled with twists and turns, but the negative experiences do not define us as much as they can inspire us. That is the true meaning of “resilience” and it grants us the power to create positive change through the spaces we create, where dialogue, access, reconciliation, healing, building community, and of course self-care, can flourish. Adichie also said in her talk: *“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”* As professionals in higher education, we are bound together with the common goal to help students, to guide them, and to instill commonly held values that encourage acceptance, openness, justice, and respect. Our stories, separately, but more so collectively, strengthen our ability to do our jobs well.

As a student affairs professional, you will encounter resistance at times. Be resilient. You may struggle to reach a goal. Be determined (and yes, reasonable too). Have the inner fortitude to find balance. Pull your own brave stories from your toolkits and remember the brave stories and journeys of others as you boldly forge ahead to make positive change. Above all, be courageous. As Maya Angelou once said, *“Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.”*

I wish you light, strength and wellness throughout your journeys.