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When Black [Girls'] Lives Really Matter

Angela Patton

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CEO of Girls For A Change; Co-Author, Finding Her Voice: How Black Girls In White Spaces Can Speak Up & Live Their Truth

> **"The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman.
> The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman.
> The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."**
> *Malcolm X*

This quote by Malcolm X is well known by Black women in my community because it still rings true today. It is also true of Black girls, who grow up to be Black women. Black girls are one of the most untapped resources on this planet. Nationally, Black girls are nearly six times more likely to get out-of-school suspension than white counterparts and more likely to be suspended multiple times than any other gender or race of student, according to research by the African American Policy Forum and Columbia Law School's Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. Before Black girls get a driver's license or go to prom, the school-to-prison pipeline is a significant reality. Until we value their lives and see their potential, we will never see an equitable world where we know women and women of color have proven to be our most impactful and compassionate leaders, though underrepresented.

What an Equitable Richmond Looks Like

An equitable Richmond is one where we see, hear, and celebrate Black girls. It's one where we experience Black girl "magic," and we give them every opportunity and resource to achieve and thrive. When we invest in developing resilient, confident children, we will get resilient, confident changemakers who will be Richmond's teachers, doctors, and artists.

In research for my upcoming book, I found that most Black teens encounter at least one act of discrimination every month and others experience numerous microaggressions weekly. Examples of these microaggressions vary, but I will share one example from a Girl Action Team participant and previous Chesterfield County High School student. She was told not to wear her headwrap to school despite it being an expression of her culture and heritage. After questioning the reasoning behind this rule several times and not receiving an answer, she decided to wear it in protest. That day, she started her cycle and needed a sanitary napkin from the nurses office. She was told she could not have a sanitary napkin unless she took her headwrap off. This policing of a Black girl's body because the school's

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administration did not agree with her headdress is unnecessary and distracting. Girls in our Girl Action Teams experience discrimination like this regularly. In fact, one of my Girl Action Teams brought more incidents like this to the forefront in an article in Style Weekly.

Often, Black girls are silenced when they are restricted from wearing culturally appropriate hairstyles. Their feelings are disregarded when they have to constantly ask people not to touch their hair. Their bodies are hypersexualized. Their passion is criminalized and overly punished when they are vocal.

Young people spend a lot of time and energy thinking about and processing how to respond to racially charged incidents that happen in and outside of school. Could you imagine what their lives would be like if they didn't have to spend so much mental and emotional energy—daily—on racism and explaining their existence?

To realize a racially equitable Richmond, allies must flex their equity muscles to minimize these damaging experiences, while also giving Black girls space to learn and build the confidence to be their best advocates and unapologetic Black selves.

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When Do Black Lives Matter?

In my work, Black lives matter yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Black lives also need to matter to those who are overtly or inadvertently upholding centuries-old systems of oppression. Black lives matter, broadly, when we all genuinely care about—and champion—issues in the Black community, particularly those issues that don't always impact us like homelessness, food scarcity, and Black maternal health. Black lives matter when everyone takes the time to listen and support issues that center Black lives. Black lives matter when we all look for opportunities to lift up Black girls so they can realize their great potential and change the trajectory of their lives, their families, and entire communities. We know that supporting women and girls greatly improves communities. Black lives matter when we allow Black girls to make mistakes, learn, grow, and heal.

In our hypervisible society, Black lives have to matter beyond social media posts about a Black life taken at the hands of the police or a march broadcasted across social media. **Black lives have to matter beyond a one-and-done diversity and inclusion training; unlearning bias and racism and promoting equity are a life's work—it gets messy, you fail, you atone, try again, and you have some wins.**

Develop and Use Your Justice Muscles

So, where do you start to create change? Start by reprogramming yourself to see the value of Black lives.

- Stop seeing Black girls as stereotypes and invest in them instead.

- Value Black lives rather than disregarding or trying to silence them.

- Check yourself when, at the core, you're asking for Black people to be something other than unapologetically Black.

- Build relationships and trust with your Black colleagues, neighbors, and beyond.

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- Stop having conversations and act.

- Celebrate Blackness.

- Support Black businesses.

- Have tough conversations with your white friends and family. Challenge them on their bias and racism.

The more you develop your equity muscles, the more you will create ripples of change that make waves.

Lift Up Richmond's Black Led Organizations

Black women and girl organizations are crucial to our healing and to creating equality in our city and yet they don't get the credit or support they are due. It's time that Richmond lifts them up and supports them equitably compared to the white led organizations our city tends to support. What would our schools and communities be without organizations that care about the wellbeing of Black women and girls? Organizations like Girls For A Change provide safe space and conversations, we raise money for scholarships, provide in kind donations, and social and civic services.

Building a Movement

Girls For A Change is not just an organization; it's a movement. We are building an ecosystem to support and protect Black girls here in Richmond. I invite you to help cultivate that ecosystem by supporting Black girl programs, respecting Black spaces, and supporting and volunteering at our public schools.

We know that school can be a harmful experience for a Black child. It can cause severe trauma, pushing our children out instead of drawing them in; or, it can be the tool they need to grow, develop, and flourish. I encourage parents of all races to enroll their children in the schools where they live and devote their energy to building up our Richmond public schools.

Unfortunately, right now in Richmond, white children are least likely to enroll in Richmond Public Schools. In fact, a 2018 Richmond Times Dispatch article revealed that for every 100 children born to parents living in the city, just 73 enrolled in first grade that school year. Compare that to the 135/100 in Hanover County, 92/100 in Henrico, and 115/100 in Chesterfield. Our schools will never improve if neighborhoods like North Side and Westover Hills continue to become gentrified and the schools abandoned. We need engaged, empowered, and resourceful parents willing to invest in the Richmond Public Schools where they live and not private schools miles away. This is why my husband and I have decided to enroll our daughter into a Richmond Public High School so that we can pour our energy and resources into supporting the school system.

> **"Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can."**
> *Arthur Ashe*

It's easy to look at the enormous barriers to equity we call institutional racism and say, "I can't fight an entire system." The City of Richmond—once the capital of the Confederacy—has a long way to go before we see real equity and change. We need to overhaul some institutions and practices, change some laws, and vote out some politicians. Still, we will never see sustainable and lasting change if we don't do the internal work to change our perspectives, shift the narratives we allow others to tell us, and speak out against racism while also lifting and supporting the Black

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community. I challenge you to support Black girls in the Richmond community—likely the most at-promise and undervalued leaders in our community.

Here are a few ways Richmond can do better by supporting Black women and girls, especially organizations that show up for them daily:

- Put resources in place that serve to cultivate Black girls—mental health, physical and nutritional, financial literacy, etc.

- Advocate for more research and funding that supports initiatives to engage Black girls in meaningful educational research that serves to explore and solve problems in their families, schools, and communities.

- Explore alternative forms of expression that showcase Black girls—like spoken word, poetry, art, drumming, storytelling, dance, theater, etc.

- Allow your children to attend schools in the neighborhoods in which you reside. You are both a resource to making things better for all.

- Stop policing Black girls' bodies, ways of dress, language, hair, nails, and words.

You can also invest in a Black girl at Girls For A Change by becoming a Hiring Partner, starting a scholarship fund, or making a donation to support our programs.

Girls For A Change, CEO, Angela Patton

As GFAC's leader, Angela is committed to "Preparing Black girls for the World…and the World for Black Girls." Angela founded Camp Diva in Richmond, Va., in 2004, to honor Diva Mstadi Smith-Roan a five-year-old who died in a firearm accident earlier that year. The program grew and went national in October 2013, when Camp Diva merged with California-based Girls For A Change (GFAC). Patton, is the CEO of the merged organization.

Angela's TED talk describing a father-daughter dance for incarcerated dads and their "at-promise" girls has been viewed over 900,000 times. She has been recognized in the local Richmond, VA press as a Top 40 under 40, in 2016 by President Obama as A White House Champion of Change for After School programming for Marginalized Girls of Color and received the Nonprofit partner of the year from the Metropolitan Business League in March 2018 . Angela is an Ambassador for who she calls "at-promise" (as opposed to "at-risk") girls and a *serial innovator*.

When she isn't inspiring change, advocating gender equality, and promoting opportunities and empowering girls, she is hanging with her family in Richmond, VA, enjoying festivals and concerts with her husband, Raymond Patton and their loving children, Imhotep and Asani.