HOPE IN ADVERSITY: A WELL-TRAVELLED JOURNEY

SENATOR WANDA THOMAS BERNARD

Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard is a highly regarded social worker, educator, researcher, community activist and advocate of social change. She has worked in mental health at the provincial level, in rural community practice at the municipal level, and, since 1990, as a professor at the Dalhousie School of Social Work, where she also served as director for a decade. In 2016, she was appointed Special Advisor on Diversity and Inclusiveness at Dalhousie University and she is the first African Nova Scotian to hold a tenure track position at Dalhousie University and to be promoted to full professor. Dr. Thomas Bernard has worked with provincial organizations to bring diversity to the political processes in Nova Scotia and teach community members about Canada's legislative process and citizen engagement. She is a founding member of the Association of Black Social Workers (ABSW) which helps address the needs of marginalized citizens, especially those of African descent. As a former member of the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, and as its past Chair, was instrumental in the development of advice to ministers regarding frameworks for gender violence prevention and health equity. At the national level, she has served as a member of the National Coalition of Advisory Councils on the Status of Women. She has served as an expert witness in human rights cases and has presented at many local, national and international forums. Dr. Thomas Bernard has received many honours for her work and community leadership, notably the Order of Nova Scotia and the Order of Canada.

When asked to speak on this panel about adversity, my biggest struggle was deciding which experience of adversity I would share. I have had so many, some of which I have never spoken about in a public forum. After much reflection, I decided to start at my beginning, my first memory of managing a set of traumatic events. I was born into poverty and struggle that was rooted in racism and sexism, and these issues really came to surface at the age of 12.

I am from a family of thirteen children. I am the sixth of ten children born to my parents, who also raised two grandchildren and a godchild for a few years when her parents died at a young age. We

are from the Black Loyalist community of East Preston, where I now live on a parcel of land that was granted to my ancestors in the 1700's. My mother had dreams of going on to post secondary education, but the segregated school in East Preston only went to grade eight. Furthermore, her father refused to send her to the neighbouring integrated school because he did not believe that education should be 'wasted' on girls. My father dropped out of school early and went to work to help his parents. My parents had a turbulent marriage, with multiple struggles that were rooted in systemic barriers and challenges. In my adult years, I have come to accept that they did the best they could with the resources that were available to them.



Senator Bernard and her sister, Valerie Thomas Hodges, as children

Our family struggles were magnified when my father was killed in a drunk driving car accident, days before his 40th birthday. My mother was 39 with 13 children at home. The oldest was 18 years, the youngest was 18 months old and I was 12. My father's death was life changing and was a transformative moment in my life. His death was the first major disaster that I had faced, and the way I managed through the pain and trauma set a strategy that has helped me to thrive through adversity. The sudden death of my father left our family in extreme poverty, simultaneously thrusting us into the category of 'deserving poor'. People inside and outside our community were more willing to help us survive the catastrophic event because they could see the hardship our future held without our father. During this time, we learned to help ourselves and each other and it was at this time that the helping tradition came to life in our family.

At the ages of 12 and 14, my older sister Valerie and I became "othermothers" to our younger siblings. The reality of sexism was very visible in our family, because despite having three older brothers, my sister and I were expected to step up and help raise the rest of the children. We became responsible for domestic chores, like cooking and cleaning, and providing most of the childcare. This pattern communicated a clear message that domestic labour was women and girls' labour.

While I was dealing with issues of poverty including food insecurity, inadequate housing and complex family dynamics, I was simultaneously becoming increasingly aware of racism and the fight for rights through the Civil Rights Movement. A few days after my father's untimely death, I left the safety and security of my segregated school, to attend an integrated junior and senior high school for the first time. I was young for my grade level since I had skipped grade one. I was 12 years old, in grade 8a, the highest academic level. Everyone questioned my right to be there, teachers, students and even

my friends. The number of Black students increased steadily as the academic standing decreased. I was the only Black student in 8a, there were two Black students in 8b and 8f was primarily Black. Even at that age I was very aware of the systemic racism inherent in the academic placement of Black students. It was a lonely, frightening, frustrating, traumatic experience being in my position, placed where I was constantly othered, watching my Black classmates be streamed out of academics. In addition to this systemic discrimination happening before my eyes, there were acts of blatant and more covert racism as well against the Black students as we integrated into this mixed school. It was a traumatic experience to be pulled out of the familiar learning environment in which Black teachers taught to our strengths and supported our learning, to an environment in which we were assumed to be unable to keep up with our white classmates, while enduring daily racism from other students and the teachers themselves.



Marguerite Thomas Parent, The Senator's mother

> **"The most important lesson is to learn to create brave spaces to speak out against injustice."**

To this day, that academic experience remains a trauma that I continually fight against. The transition into integrated school my peers and I endured was during the 1965-66 academic year. That experience continued throughout my high school years, and even as I write this, I am reliving that trauma. I faced constant questions of belonging and endured subversive microaggressions that communicated doubt in my ability, and intelligence. These messages of doubt and othering continue to take place in my everyday world. I truly believe the fact that I not only survived, but thrived, is nothing short of a miracle. It is an example of resilience in action. The lessons of survival that I learned during those traumatic high school years were to: work hard, stay focused, and prove your ability with actions, not words. Those who are able to advocate for themselves with words alone likely benefit from white

privilege, male privilege or the intersection of both. It was always a necessity for me to prove my ability and intelligence through my strong academic standing.

The most important lesson is to learn to create brave spaces to speak out against injustice. This is the lesson that I have continued to use over the years, and I share with young Black people I meet who ask me for advice.

RESILIENCE: THRIVING THROUGH ADVERSITY

After surviving these traumas early in life, I was determined to continue along this path, not just to survive, but to thrive. I was academically strong, which was my primary social capital. I had experienced such positive affirmations from my teachers in the segregated school, that I entered high school with a strong sense of my academic ability and worked hard to maintain my high academic standing. I had to prove that I belonged in the academic stream despite assumptions that I did not.

As a result of being a member of the "deserving poor", an opportunity for post-secondary education presented itself that otherwise would not have been available to me. Although I was bright and strong academically, none of my teachers talked with me about post secondary education. Access to university for my sister Valerie and me was made possible due to the intervention of Don Denison, a white community member, an ally, who was a member of the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NSAACP). He was a Captain in the Canadian Armed Forces, who had just returned to Nova Scotia from Ghana, at the time of my father's accident. It was a very public death, because two men were killed, and a third man sustained major brain damage. Don Denison believed in the value of post secondary education and he believed that it could break barriers and change lives. He maintained contact with us over the ensuing years and learned that Valerie and I were both doing very well in school, so he started conversations about university. After he gauged our interest and assessed our academic ability, he reached out to a childhood friend of his who happened to be the President of Mount Saint Vincent University. Through this connection, the doors were opened for me, Valerie, and our cousin Connie Glasgow. Valerie and Connie were in grade 12, and I was in grade 11. Mr. Denison had to convince my mother to allow me to go with my sister since I was only 15, and somehow, she agreed. Valerie, Connie and I headed to Halifax to begin our post-secondary education.



November 2017. In the Senate Chamber with a group of young women.

Despite being very grateful for the opportunity to pursue post-secondary studies, I was not socially mature enough to handle the pressure. At the end of my first year, I had failed all but one subject, so I was not permitted to return the following year. This was a devastating blow to my ego, my confidence and my self-esteem. I had to find a job and within a

week I was hired on at a local bakery. A week later I was fired from the bakery because I was too slow making the donuts. This major set back impacted my self esteem and my mental health. At this point I had to find a job, but no one would hire me. One day, I stepped out in faith, and called a radio talk show to ask for help. To my surprise, there was a response. A manager of Beaver Foods, at Dalhousie University Medical School, offered me a job as a short order cook. After about 12 months in the position, I became aware that if I wanted a future beyond minimum wage, I must return to university.

One year after that realization, I managed to return to Mount St Vincent and three years later I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts Degree. I went on to get my Masters Degree in Social Work at Dalhousie University. I later moved to England to complete a PhD in Social Work at Sheffield University. While my 47-page Curriculum Vitae (CV) looks impressive, what it does not show is the adversity I faced in some form at every step along this life journey. My CV does not show how I learned to persevere and learn from my setbacks. Most importantly, it does not show how I learned to challenge adversity using positive coping strategies and advocating for myself.

In addition to personal adversity, I experienced deep learning through advocacy and activism, through the civil rights movement. I was drawn to the work of the Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. I was equally drawn to our Nova Scotian Black civil rights leaders like Rocky Jones, HAJ Gus Wedderburn and Calvin Ruck. I could see that these leaders who were in front of the movements were all men, while the women were working behind the scenes. I often wondered how my life story would have been different had I been born a man. I became aware of the intersection of racism and sexism and how these women were often invisible, and their contributions overlooked. I could see my own reality at that same intersection. Was it even possible to break through the barriers that existed at the intersection of race and gender, or the lived realities of racism and sexism?

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My first taste of activism was in high school when Martin Luther King was killed. Some of my peers and I started a protest in our school to advocate for our rights as Black students. I remember feeling empowered and hopeful. I remember believing that change was possible. And I remember that hopeful feeling associated with using my voice and my presence for change.

FINDING AND MAINTAINING CRITICAL HOPE

As I reflect over my life journey, and the many points of adversity, I find critical hope in a myriad of places. Part of my critical hope comes from a firm belief that fundamentally people want to do the right thing for the right reasons. They may just need some help in understanding what the right thing is. I find incredible critical hope in the fact that there are so many people who are willing to stand up, speak out and take action against injustices they experience or witness. What gives me critical hope is how many people are willing to be mentors

and allies. I know this because I have been helped along my journey by many different mentors and allies, some visible and others invisible. Along each step of the way I have had someone guiding, supporting, mentoring, encouraging and helping me in one way or another. I find critical hope in lessons learned from significant movements like the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and most recently the Black Lives Matter movement. Activism, mentorship and allyship have built my resilience and give me critical hope, and it's my critical hope that helps me stay strong in the struggle.