

TRANSCRIPT: “I wasn’t comfortable”: Being a student of color in Garfield High's advanced classes

Length: 16 minutes

Completed podcast: kuow.org/post/best-times-worst-times-and-first-times

Carlin: I’M CARLIN BILLS.

Jessie: AND I’M JESSIE NGUYEN.

AND WE’RE BOTH GOING TO BE SENIORS AT GARFIELD HIGH SCHOOL NEXT YEAR.

Carlin: WAIT, HOLD ON.

LET’S GIVE THEM A LITTLE BACKGROUND FIRST.

WHAT IS GARFIELD?

[PLAY VOX POPS:

Mass kneel of the football game

Everybody who comes out of there is a somebody

Bulldogs 74 Top dogs

Great location for all diverse families

More diverse than where I went to highschool

Uh yeah, definitely more diverse than the school where I went to]

Carlin: OKAY, SO NOW YOU KNOW A LITTLE BIT ABOUT

WHAT PEOPLE ON THE STREETS OF SEATTLE THINK ABOUT GARFIELD.

LET’S SEE HOW THAT MATCHES UP WITH THE HISTORY OF GARFIELD.

Jessie: SO GARFIELD WAS FOUNDED IN 1923 IN THE CENTRAL DISTRICT,

WHICH IS A HISTORICALLY BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD.

AND THAT HAS A LOT TO DO WITH THE REDLINING DISTRICTS

Carlin: AND JESSIE, WHY DON’T YOU EXPLAIN WHAT REDLINING IS?

Jessie: THE SEATTLE MUNICIPAL DEFINES IT AS A DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICE, TARGETED AT AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND OTHERS OF COLOR, BY WHICH BANKS, INSURANCE COMPANIES, AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS REFUSED OR LIMITED LOANS, MORTGAGES, AND INSURANCE WITHIN SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIC AREAS.

Carlin: THAT SOUNDS AWFUL!
SO BASICALLY YOU'RE SAYING THESE PEOPLE OF COLOR IN SEATTLE COULDN'T BUY HOMES OR ANYTHING IN SPECIFIC AREAS OF THE CITY BECAUSE THEY WERE RESERVED FOR THE WHITE PEOPLE?

Jessie: YUP.
THE THING IS THOUGH, THE CENTRAL DISTRICT IS RAPIDLY BEING GENTRIFIED

Carlin: AND ON TOP OF THAT, A LOT OF WHITE STUDENTS LIKE ME ARE COMING FROM DIFFERENT NEIGHBORHOODS JUST TO TAKE AP CLASSES.
I ACTUALLY TOOK 4 LAST YEAR.
I'VE LEARNED THAT THE AP PROGRAM ISN'T REALLY INCLUSIVE.

[JESSIE IMPROV ABOUT EXPERIENCE IN PROGRAM]

Jessie: SO THE SYSTEM DOESN'T JUST START AT HIGHSCHOOL.
WE'VE REALIZED THAT ITS KINDA PREDETERMINED.
IT ALL STARTS WITH A TEST.

PHYLLIS FLETCHER,
GARFIELD CLASS OF 1990 AND MANAGING EDITOR OF THE NORTHWEST NEWS NETWORK, SHARES HER EXPERIENCE TESTING INTO THE PROGRAM.

[SOUND OF PEN ON PAPER]

[Phyllis: “When I was in kindergarten, I was tested for Seattle's so-called gifted programs which were called Horizon and IPP.”]

Carlin: MR. LUGO IS A HISTORY TEACHER AT GARFIELD WHO I MIGHT HAVE NEXT YEAR.
HE HAS A LATINO BACKGROUND.
HE HAS NOTICED THAT THE SEGREGATION STARTS EVEN EARLY ON
BECAUSE THE BASIS TO TAKE THE TEST COMES FROM A PLACE OF PRIVILEGE.

[Jeremy: “Maybe the students who I run across don't even know that private testing is a thing for APP. That is something that if you don't have the access, the privilege, the know-how, the savvy to work the system, you're not going to be able to.”]

Jessie: IF THE STUDENTS GET ACCEPTED INTO THE ACCELERATED PROGRESS PROGRAM,
OR APP—
I KNOW, CONFUSING—
THEN THEY GET TO GO TO THE MIDDLE SCHOOL THAT OFFERS IT.
THEN THE STUDENTS GET TRACKED INTO GARFIELD HIGH SCHOOL
WHERE THEY’RE OFFERED THE AP CLASSES.

Carlin: I MEAN, I KNOW I GOT INTO A PROGRAM
BASED OFF A TEST I TOOK IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.
AND PHYLLIS REMEMBERS HOW THAT TEST INFLUENCED THE CLASSES SHE GOT TO TAKE AT
GARFIELD AS A BIRACIAL BLACK AND WHITE PERSON

[Phyllis: “If you got in, you got enrolled in honors classes by default. So you had already been tracked from this test that may or may not reflect intelligence. You already are tracked into these classes that have a completely different set of expectations than so-called regular classes. Even other biracial people, if they looked more Black than I did, they got treated completely differently by the school system.”]

Jessie: BASICALLY, IT CAN BE REALLY HARD FOR KIDS WHO WEREN'T TRACKED INTO THE PROGRAM
TO GET INTO AN AP CLASS.

A LOT OF STUDENTS LIKE RHEANA DALE HAD TO WORK TO GET INTO AP CLASSES.

BECAUSE SHE'S AN AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT WHO WASN'T TRACKED AT AN EARLY AGE.

[RHEANA: It was really difficult for me to even be considered to be put into my AP classes. I kind of had to...almost...not like fight my counselor, but I had to, like, constantly reassure him that I was going to do fine in those classes and I felt like there was no support from him either.]

Carlin: SO BASICALLY, THE TRACKING SYSTEM STARTS FROM A YOUNG AGE AND DIVIDES STUDENTS.

Jessie: YEAH, AND THIS DIVIDE IS MOST CLEARLY SHOWN BY THE RACIAL MAKEUP OF THE DIFFERENT TRACKS AT GARFIELD,

OR IN OTHER WORDS, THE SEGREGATION AT GARFIELD.

MR. LUGO AND PHYLLIS SHARE MORE OF THEIR THOUGHTS.

[Jeremy: "In those classes I see a lot of white students. I see a pretty decent amount of girls which was interesting. But I don't see a super huge amount of students of color. I see some Asian students which was pretty again standard for the APP makeup, but not a lot of African American students, not a lot of Latino students, not a lot of Native Americans students, or other students who I know are at the school in different numbers but certainly weren't represented in my AP classroom."]

[Phyllis: "There was, let's see, one other Black girl that I had gone to school with since fifth grade who was also in APP. There was another Black girl whose parents had advocated for her to be in AP classes even though she hadn't been tracked into APP, and almost everybody else was white. There were maybe a couple of Asian kids."]

Carlin: YEAH AND I'VE NOTICED HOW IN MY AP CLASSES,

WHITE STUDENTS HAVE MORE SUPPORT DURING CLASS,

AND THEY TEND TO DOMINATE THE CONVERSATION.

WHITE AP STUDENTS IVAN [EYE-VAN] DUSSEAU AND ZACK GATES GIVES US A FEW EXAMPLES.

[Ivan: "I'm pretty talkative in class so me and, there were definitely some very clear people who took an interest in the class and they were primarily upper class, usually white people...there were probably two white girls, another white boy, and then one Asian girl who spoke the most during that entire class."]

[Zack: You know there are these terrible stories that I hear from people where it's like, only kids of color have their hands raised and the teacher says to them, "No one? Really?", and it sounds like something out of a movie but it happens.]

**Jessie: AND MANY PEOPLE OF COLOR DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE IN THESE AP CLASSES.
LIKE TSION BELGU, A RISING JUNIOR AT GARFIELD,
WHO REMEMBERS WHAT IT WAS LIKE
BEING THE ONLY BLACK PERSON IN HER AP WORLD HISTORY CLASS.**

[TSION Belgu: "I wasn't comfortable at all. I hated going to that class like so much. Because I feel like I was the only person who understands what I was saying and I just felt like no one could relate to what I was feeling.]

Jessie: BUT THIS SEGREGATION ISN'T JUST LIMITED TO CLASSROOMS

Carlin: MR. LUGO HAS NOTICED THIS AROUND THE SCHOOL AS WELL

[SOUND OF A CROWDED HALL]

[Jeremy: You can see that very clearly at lunch time at Garfield if you walk the halls you'll see oh this is a white hallway, this is a Black hallway, this is maybe where Asian students hang out. You could also go to the different clubs and find that clubs are typically racially homogenous as well."]

Jessie: OKAY, OKAY.

**SO CLEARLY GARFIELD HAS A CULTURE OF EXCLUSION AND SEGREGATION,
STEMMING FROM COMMUNITY HISTORY.**

BUT THERE WAS ONE SPECIFIC EVENT AT GARFIELD
THAT REALLY SHOWED HOW LACKING WE ARE IN DAY TO DAY DIVERSITY.

Carlin: WHAT WAS THAT?

Jessie: SO I WAS A LEAD IN 2017'S SPRING MUSICAL, WHICH WAS IN THE HEIGHTS.
IT'S SUPPOSED TO HAVE AN ALL-LATINX CAST BECAUSE IT'S ABOUT LATINX PEOPLE
AND THEIR WASHINGTON HEIGHTS NEIGHBORHOOD BEING GENTRIFIED IN NEW YORK.
BUT WE WEREN'T ABLE TO MAKE THAT A REALITY
AND THERE WERE ACTUALLY A LOT OF PROBLEMS THAT CROPPED UP BECAUSE OF THAT.

TWO STUDENTS FROM THE CAST WERE ABLE TO TALK MORE ABOUT IT WITH ME.
ONE WAS DECLAN WHO I MET EARLIER THIS YEAR,
HE HIMSELF IS HALF FILIPINO HALF WHITE,
AND WAS CAST IN THE LEAD ROLE OF SONNY, A CHARACTER WITH A LATINX BACKGROUND.

**[Declan: We do not have the Puerto Rican or Dominican population to do In the Heights.
So the fact that everyone in the cast tried out for Puerto Rican and Dominican roles and continued to
portray Puerto Rican and Dominican stereotypes on stage, we all were just decided to be complicit in
that oppression.**

**There were a lot of cases of cultural appropriation with like certain hairstyles of the Black community
or the Latinx community, and like outfits and mannerisms... a lot of cultural mocking and cultural
erasure from the show, as well as just stereotyping of a lot of the characters.”]**

Jessie: RHEANA IS ANOTHER FRIEND OF MINE.
SHE'S AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WHO PLAYED A PUERTO RICAN LEAD.
SHE TALKED ABOUT HOW THE CAST TRIED TO MOVE FORWARD FROM THERE.

**[Rheana: “We even tried to talk to the director and the choir director about it on several different
occasions, and they blew us off or didn't want to talk to us. Or even sometimes they would pretend
that they were listening but actually they would be talking to each other and totally not interested in**

whatever we were saying, and leaving the room or telling us that, ‘Oh, I know that you’re feeling super emotional about it, but get back to work.’”]

Carlin: THAT SOUNDS PRETTY BAD. WHAT DID THE DIRECTOR HAVE TO SAY ABOUT IT?

Jessie: WE ASKED HIM FOR AN INTERVIEW

BUT UNFORTUNATELY HE WAS UNABLE TO SPEAK TO US ON SHORT NOTICE SINCE HE WAS TRAVELING.

HOWEVER, THE CAST REMEMBERS HIM SAYING THAT HIS INTENTIONS WERE TO

DRAW IN MORE STUDENTS OF COLOR TO THE PREDOMINANTLY WHITE PROGRAM.

HERE’S DECLAN WITH HIS THOUGHTS

[DECLAN: “I hate to admit it, but I think he did draw in more students of color than in prior years just by doing In the Heights. And I think that comes from people, students of color, who are in that kind of like realm for musical, seeing that-- seeing a poster for In the Heights auditions and realizing ‘I don’t want this to only be white kids.’”]

Jessie: IN THE END, WE DID THE BEST WE COULD WITH THE SITUATION.

[Declan: “There was a statement given at the beginning of the show, in English and Spanish, which was heavily censored by the director, about what we were doing as a cast.”]

Jessie: AND YOU CAN FIND A WRITTEN STATEMENT ON GARFIELD HIGH SCHOOL’S WEBSITE.

[Music transition]

Jessie: BUT THERE’S MORE THAT THE DRAMA DEPARTMENT,

AND THE SCHOOL AS A WHOLE,

COULD DO TO MOVE GARFIELD AWAY FROM RACIST PRACTICES.

Carlin: ONE THING GARFIELD DID THIS YEAR WAS IMPLEMENT A PROGRAM CALLED HONORS FOR ALL

WHERE ALL FRESHMAN TAKE THE SAME HONORS CLASSES,

INSTEAD OF BEING SEPARATED INTO GENERAL AND HONORS CLASSES IMMEDIATELY.

MR. LUGO ADVOCATED FOR THIS PROGRAM.

[Jeremy: “Our idea was we have tremendously capable students in the general track who the only reason that we could see they weren't succeeding or weren't able to succeed at the next level is they weren't being pushed enough or weren't given the opportunity to see if they could succeed in that environment.”]

Carlin: SO IT'S WORKING AGAINST THE TRACKING OF STUDENTS INTO SPECIFIC CLASSES.
THIS TARGETS SEGREGATION BY HELPING TO BREAK DOWN SOME OF THE BARRIERS

Jessie: DO YOU KNOW HOW IT WENT OVER?

Carlin: NO, I DIDN'T GO THROUGH IT.
BUT DECLAN DID THIS PAST YEAR.

[Declan “It was really exciting I guess to be in an environment with more people of color...but as soon as the year started, it was really just kind of scary to see a lot of people’s reactions from like kids from Hamilton and honors kids from Washington being like I hate this, being like uh this program is detracting from my education like there were a lot of kids who very much disagreed with Honors for All and thought of it as detrimental to how they were learning.”]

Carlin: AND STUDENTS, IVAN, [EYE-VAN] DECLAN AND ZACK HAD EVEN MORE IDEAS ABOUT STEPS GARFIELD CAN TAKE.

[Ivan: “The solution that would work the best for our school is just, more teachers.”]

[Declan “I think for the class of 2021 they’ll have Honors for All in their freshman and sophomore year which is great.”]

[Zack “Uhm, honestly I think we should de-track the whole system.”]

Jessie: PERSONALLY, I THINK SOME OF THE STEPS CAN TRANSLATE BEYOND JUST THE GARFIELD COMMUNITY BECAUSE RACISM AND SEGREGATION AREN'T JUST APPARENT IN OUR SCHOOL; THEY ARE PREVALENT IN OUR SOCIETY AS WELL.

Carlin: MR. LUGO BROUGHT UP A REALLY GOOD POINT ABOUT WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE PROGRESS IN OUR SOCIETY.

[Jeremy: "It's going to require some really brutal awkward conversations that are not going to be necessarily especially fun, but they're necessary, they're really important to the growth of our school, to the growth of our city, and the continued development of our culture."]

Carlin: WELL IM VERY THANKFUL THAT WE GOT TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION TOGETHER.

Jessie: ME TOO!

AND HOPEFULLY THIS WILL SPARK SOME OF OUR LISTENERS TO BREAK SOME BARRIERS AND HAVE TOUGH BUT ESSENTIAL CONVERSATIONS AS WELL.

Carlin: THANK YOU TO ALL OF THE POWERFUL VOICES WE HEARD TODAY-- TSION BELGU, PHYLLIS FLETCHER, MR. LUGO.

Jessie: IVAN DUSSEAU, ZACK GATES, RHEANA DALE, AND DECLAN MURRAY.

Carlin: AS WELL AS OUR VOX POP PARTICIPANTS.

Jessie: ALSO, SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, SURYA [SOO-RYA] HENDRY,

Carlin: AND TO OUR STAFF EDITOR, JENNY ASARNOW [UH-SAR-NO].

Jessie: LISTEN TO MORE OF OUR PODCASTS BY SUBSCRIBING ON ITUNES, OR GO TO KUOW DOT ORG SLASH RADIOACTIVE.

KEEP CHECKING IN ON OUR FACEBOOK AT FACEBOOK DOT COM SLASH RADIOACTIVE YOUTH MEDIA, AND ON TWITTER AT KUOWRADIOACTIVE.

Carlin: YOU CAN ALSO FIND US ON INSTAGRAM AT KUOW RADIOACTIVE.

Jessie: SIGNING OFF, THIS IS JESSIE AND CARLIN FROM...RADIOACTIVE

[Play RadioActive outro]