Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance

In Their Shoes[1]

Students produce a narrative piece that tells about an experience from the perspective of a character, historical figure, or author.

READY!

1. **Facilitators for 6th-8th grade:** Ask students to read the excerpt below from chapter 3 of Sharon Flake's novel, "The Skin I'm In".
   Facilitators for 9th-12th grade: Ask students to read Rachel L. Swarns' article, "The White House: A Slave's View".

SET!

1. Have students reflect on this question:
   What are the effects of injustice, historically and today?

GO!

1. Have students address the question above by writing a short story, play, memoir or monologue that tells about an experience from the point of view of Makeelia in "The Skin I'm In" or Paul Jennings in "The White House: A Slave's View".
2. Students should write their narrative in first person and use appropriate details and dialogue to develop the plot, setting and characters.

[1] Teaching Tolerance: In Their Shoes

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The Skin I'm In (Chapter 3)

This excerpt comes from The Skin I'm In, a novel written by Sharon Flake and published in 1998.

I didn't always hang with Char. Last year, I hung by myself. I went to class. Got mostly A's. Nobody even noticed me till Caleb Jamaal Assam came along. Caleb's the smartest boy in school. Cute. Friendly. A poet. I should of known being with him was gonna cause me trouble.

He stared at me half the year. I thought he saw what everybody else saw. Skinny, poor, black Maleeka. But Caleb saw something different. He said I was pretty. Said he liked my eyes and sweet cocoa brown skin. He wrote me poems and letters. He put spearmint gum inside. Walked me to class. Gave me a ring. I ain't told Momma.

After a while, everybody knew. Charlese and them laughed when Caleb and I walked by. They'd stuck out their legs and tried to trip me. They wrote Caleb notes saying not even the Goodwill would want my clothes. Somebody said I had hair so nappy I needed a rake to comb it.

It was that class trip to Washington, D.C., where things really fell apart. Caleb sat next to me. They teased us all the way there. Barks came from the back of the bus. Spit bombs flew my way. Then John-John started singing his song. "Maleeka, Maleeka, we sure want to keep her but she so black, we just can't see her." The whole bus started in. Teachers tried to make them stop. By then, it was too late.

I looked at Caleb. He gave me the goofiest smile and said, "Sorry, Maleeka…," and moved to the front of the bus with his boys. They slapped him five. Everybody laughed and clapped. I sat there with a frozen smile on my face like that stupid Mona Lisa. Till this day, I don't know nothing about Washington, D.C., just that I don't ever want to go there no more.

Things got even worse after that. Kids picked on me more than ever. They sang John-John's stupid song whenever I walked the halls. They got on my case about every little thing. My hair. My clothes. My color. My good grades. The fact that teachers liked me.

I didn't want to go to school after a while , but Momma said I had to. So I came up with a plan. I went to Char and said if she would let me hang out with her, you know, kind of look out for me, I would do her homework and stuff. She laughed at first. Said for me to get out of her face. That she don't want no geeks hanging round her, especially no ugly ones. I didn't listen. I turned everywhere she was. The bathroom. Lunchroom.

The water fountain. I even did her homework a few times to show her I knew my stuff. She gave in after a while, and kids started leaving me alone. After that, Char started bringing clothes to school for me. “You got to look like something when you with me,” she said, kicking a bag of stuff my way. But even those hundred-dollar pants suits she brought in for me to wear can’t make up for the hurt I feel when she slaps me with them mean words of hers.

The White House: A Slave's View

"The White House: A Slave's View" is an article written by Rachel L. Swarns and published in the New York Times Upfront magazine on November 23, 2009.

The discovery of a memoir by one of President Madison's slaves sheds light on the role slavery once played in the White House

In 1809, a young boy from a wealthy Virginia estate stepped into President James Madison's White House and caught the first glimpse of his new home. The East Room was unfinished, he recalled years later in a memoir. Pennsylvania Avenue was unpaved and "always in an awful condition from either mud or dust," he recounted.

"The city was a dreary place," he continued.

The boy's name was Paul Jennings, and when he first walked into the Executive Mansion, he was a 10-year-old slave.

Over the course of his long life, Jennings witnessed, and perhaps participated in, the rescue of George Washington's portrait from the White House during the War of 1812 and stood by Madison's side at his deathbed. He bought his freedom, helped organize a daring (but unsuccessful) slave escape, and became the first person to put his White House recollections into a memoir.

This summer, Jennings's story took center stage when dozens of his descendants gathered for a reunion in the White House. It was a remarkable moment in the history of the mansion, which was built with slave labor and is now home to Barack Obama, the nation's first black President, and his family.

New details about Jennings's life and family have emerged through the research of Beth Taylor at Montpelier, the Madison plantation in Virginia. Over the past two years, Taylor has pored over court records and tracked down and interviewed his descendants, discovering historical documents and the only known photograph of Jennings …. Taylor also found a rare edition of his recollections, released in 1865 under the title *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison.*

The visit by Jennings's descendants highlighted the day-to-day role that slaves once played in the White House.

"It really is a story that isn't well-told [sic] yet," says Lonnie G. Bunch, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. "It lets people realize just how big a shadow slavery cast on America."

Slavery was legal in Washington, D.C., from the time it became the nation's capital in 1800. In fact, the city was a major center for the slave trade, with thousands of slaves passing through on their way to plantations further south. Congress didn't outlaw slavery in Washington until 1862.

Few historical records exist about the black people who lived and worked in the White House in its early years, according to the White House curator. Slaves were barred from learning to read and write, and their owners often considered their stories inconsequential.

That's why Jennings's memoirs are notable, particularly because he was so closely linked to President Madison and to the portrait of George Washington, which is considered the White House's most valuable historical object. The portrait, painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1796, is the only item currently on display that was also present when the White House opened in 1800.

Madison, who succeeded Thomas Jefferson to become the fourth President, held office from 1809 to 1817. In his 19-page memoir, Jennings recalled the chaotic escape from the White House hours before the British burned the building in 1814. He also described Madison as a frugal man who owned only one suit and socialized with Thomas Jefferson. Jennings said he often served and shaved the President and recalled that he was kind to his slaves.

CONFLICT WITH MRS. MADISON

Jennings, who died in 1874 at age 75, did not discuss his personal difficulties in his memoir, but historians say he encountered many hardships. As a slave, he was forced to live apart from his wife and children, who lived on another plantation. And he seems to have chafed under Dolley Madison's ownership after her husband's death in 1836.

Articles in abolitionist newspapers reported that Mrs. Madison treated her slaves poorly. In March 1848, the Liberator newspaper published a letter charging that she hired out Jennings to others and then kept "the last red cent" of his pay.

The letter also said Mrs. Madison had refused to free Jennings, as her husband had wished. Instead, she sold him to an insurance agent, who in turn sold him to Senator Daniel Webster of New Hampshire for $120. (Webster, who opposed slavery, let Jennings buy his freedom by working as a servant in his household.)

Some historians think Mrs. Madison's refusal to free him might be the reason Jennings challenged Mrs. Madison's claim that she saved Washington's portrait. It might also explain why he helped one of her slaves try to escape in 1848 aboard a schooner known as the Pearl. (The ship's captains planned to smuggle dozens of

slaves down the Potomac River and up the Chesapeake Bay to Philadelphia, but the Pearl was intercepted by a posse boat organized by slave owners.)

Jennings was 48 when he finally bought his freedom. As a free man, he later worked in a government office, bought property, and even helped support Mrs. Madison with “small sums from my own pocket” when she fell on hard times.

For some of Jennings’s descendants, the discovery of this history was completely unexpected. Raleigh Marshall, a 26-year-old technology consultant and Jennings’s great-great-great-grandson, was startled to recognize his own features reflected in a photograph of Jennings.

“It was a little bit eerie,” says Marshall, who met other members of the Jennings clan for the first time in February at a reunion organized by [sic] Montpelier. “It’s a lot to absorb.”