

That's Your Family

Who You Callin' a...

Anyone who followed hip hop music in the 90s will be able to complete the title phrase. In her song U.N.I.T.Y, Queen Latifah compelled us to challenge anyone who called us “out of our names.” Expletives aside, her song was a powerful reminder about the importance of knowing your name. The significance of names goes back to biblical days when a person’s name was connected to his/her destiny. The movie Roots, based on the book by Alex Haley reiterated the importance of names in the iconic scene where Kunta Kinte is nearly whipped to death because he refuses to accept the name given to him by his captors. Kunta Kinte must have understood that his name was the inheritance he would leave his descendants in the generations that followed.

I grew up under the privilege and shadow of the name “Fordham.” Long before I even knew my last name, my life was being shaped by its influence. The Fordham name is one that I won’t likely ever give up. Even if I get married, I’ll probably still call myself a Fordham. I’ve done things and gone places, know and am known by people I probably never would have if I’d had another last name. And the greatest irony is... I’m not a Fordham at all.

The first time I became conscious of the name’s ability to alter my path was in high school. My brother was one of the key basketball players on the high school team during a period of “dream team” years. It didn’t matter that he spent those years and many that followed trying to simply keep to himself; enthusiasm was always in the air when his name was mentioned. During the one year that we were students together in high school, I lived in the warmth of his shadow. For one year my life followed the teenage movie script: Something extraordinary happens to awkward girl, and she becomes popular overnight. For me that “something extraordinary” was sharing the last name with Barry Fordham.

My sister, Cynthia, had graduated from high school long before I arrived, but it didn’t stop my teachers from comparing my behavior to hers. By

sophomore year my confidence and desire to remix the meaning of the Fordham name sometimes led me in wrong directions. I never broke the law, but I tried my best to bend as many school rules as possible. All my best efforts were to no avail; I was a Fordham, and consequently every deviation off of that path was met with a comparison. Cynthia was so sweet, Cynthia was so hard-working, Cynthia was never in trouble... you get the idea. I might have grimaced a little, but I never really minded. I know was blessed that they came before me, being the “Fordhams” that took me years to understand and appreciate. If they had defined the Fordham path on hell’s wheels, my life would be completely different.

My parents’ legacy of kindness is probably the trait of the Fordham name from which I have benefited most. Many of the hard circumstances I might have endured were punctuated by the kindness other people extended to me, in part, because I was the daughter of Monroe and Freddie Mae Fordham. Even now, rarely a day passes without an encounter with someone who was in one of their classes or worked with or went to church with one or both of them. And all of those encounters for all of these years have been only good.

But I’m not a Fordham, and neither was my father – at least not biologically.

James “Jabo” Fordham became my dad’s stepfather when my dad was in third grade. James Fordham died many, many years before I was born. As far as I know, he never felt the chill of a Buffalo winter. He never experienced the thrill of my brother’s basketball game. He never whispered encouragement to my sister. He never met my mother or read any of the words that have been written about him. He was a laborer who worked for B.F. Goodrich changing tires. According to my dad, James Fordham only had a fourth-grade education, and he “wrote numbers” to help his family survive tough times. He believed in heart to heart talks, and he was the only man my father called “daddy.” I wonder if James Fordham knew or even suspected the influence that his name would have.

The actions that are associated with a person’s name might be even more important than the names we call ourselves and each other. I recently watched a documentary called Meet the Hitlers. The film examines the lives of people from all over the world who share the name with the infamous leader of the Nazi Party. Some embraced the name, and others recounted horrific

experiences that resulted from having the name, but in all cases, there was an irrefutable association with the man and more importantly with his catastrophic actions. On the contrary, the name Mother Teresa is synonymous with words like charity and generosity because of her self-less acts and concern for the poor.

Recently, I attended the funeral of a man who spent his life establishing a name for himself. Although he accomplished great things and accumulated many accolades, his name will very likely be remembered because of his many acts of kindness. I met Colonel Cravene Givens when my daughter was preparing to leave for college. She would be attending North Carolina A&T State University, where Colonel Givens had been a student in the 1950s. Before she left, he introduced himself, welcomed her into the Aggie family, and handed her a card with the name and number of his close college friend who was still living in the area. My daughter passed the card to me, and I stuffed it in my purse between wads of receipts, assuming that I'd never need it again.

Within the first hour after arriving on campus, many of our worst nightmares came to fruition. We had driven ten hours with a van full of dorm room necessities but had no room in which to put them. Months of correspondence confirming Tea's room assignment, meal plan, etc. was lost, and none of the frustrated campus employees could do anything about it (and no one could tell us who could). We were sent from person to person and from building to building, until at the end the day, as all the offices were preparing to close, we were sent back to the original person who told us to come back the next day. We were on the verge of getting in the van and driving back to New York when I remembered the card that Colonel Givens had given us. That card ended up being a "golden ticket" and Colonel Givens' name was the secret password. Nearly 50 years had passed since he had been a student at A&T, but saying his name opened doors as easily as if he had been standing right by Tea's side. During her time at A&T he often came back for homecoming and other events. He was always intentional about visiting Tea and literally standing by her side as she went on to make a name for herself that transcended being known as the blue-haired girl from New York.

A lot of what we see on television and even hear in some of the music suggests that Queen Latifah's affirmation fell on a generation with deaf ears. Some of the very names that at one time could only be used on late

night paid television stations like HBO, are now used as commonly as the pronouns “he” and “she.” Maybe the prolific use of words like the “n-word” and the “b-word” as substitutes for real names is just part of a trend that will eventually fade. Most trends are cyclical, so maybe some new artist will remix Queen Latifah’s lyrics for my grandchildren or even my great grandchildren. Maybe the next great director will bring Kunta Kinte’s words to life for a third time. And although I know there won’t be another Colonel Givens, I hope there will be more men and women like him who live in such a way that their names will open doors.