

Under stay-at-home orders, a new tradition has spread from one Brunswick office to another: At day's end, a colleague sends a short essay to his or her working-from-home office mates. These are funny, sad, inspirational and philosophical notes, often sprinkled with favorite recipes and TV shows. The Review is selecting a few to share with a larger audience. On June 5, Adam Carlson, an Account Director with Brunswick Insight, shared this with his New York colleagues.

ABLACK LIFE

is not a Trend

MY WIFE'S FATHER IS BRITISH AND WHITE, AND her mother's family is of African descent, from Guatemala, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and the American South.

Her full name is Catherine Anne Heywood—which is just about as British as you can get. And that was deliberate. Her parents chose her name to be racially ambiguous because they knew that in America an “ethnic” name would put her at a disadvantage when applying to schools and jobs, on top of the countless other disadvantages she would face for the rest of her life that would have nothing to do with her intelligence or qualifications.

Cathy's mom is a psychology professor at Hunter College. From the time Cathy was aged two, she raised Cathy by herself in an apartment in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. From an early age, her mom instilled in her the value of a quality education as a way not to get a seat at the table, but to simply get a foot in the door. Throughout her childhood she received music and art lessons, was in Girl Scouts, played sports, and was exposed to everything that New York City had to offer. She was a happy child.

Cathy's mom put her through some of the best Catholic and private schools New York City has to offer all the way through 12th grade, and then through George Washington University (where we met). Though Cathy was accepted to each school on her own merits, this was made possible through scholarships, specifically those for students of color.

More specifically, A Better Chance (ABC).

“One day your children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren will ask you what you did during this time. What do you want your answer to be?”
By Brunswick's
ADAM CARLSON.

Founded in 1963, ABC has provided thousands of students of color with the chance to attend college-prep private schools and public schools across the country. Their mission is to “increase substantially the number of well-educated young people of color who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility and leadership in American society.” Cathy was lucky. A stranger at an uptown restaurant came up to her and her mom and told them about the scholarship program.

Cathy is now a biologist and automation engineer at the New York Genome Center. She is currently working on COVID genome sequencing and diagnostic testing. I'm insanely proud of her. Once or twice a week, she walks the six miles to and from our apartment in Brooklyn to her lab in SoHo to continue that work. Like many essential workers, Cathy contracted COVID while on the job. Luckily, after six weeks she made a full recovery, but she still faces an ongoing threat to her health that is not novel.

When people see her walking by them on the street, they can't see her “white” name. They can't see her degrees. They can't see that she's an essential worker. They see a Black person. They make assumptions. Some of them see people that look like her as a threat, especially police. This is not new. This didn't just start with the murder of Breonna Taylor or George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery. This isn't a “lived experience”—it's been her whole life, and her mother's and grandmother's lives before her.

When she was younger Cathy didn't think about



The author between his mother-in-law and wife, Catherine Anne Heywood, on their wedding day in 2017.

race. She didn't even identify as Black, she identified as mixed race. It wasn't until middle school and high school when society decided for her that she was Black, and it hasn't let her forget it ever since.

Her mom was followed around by security at a high-end store because they assumed she couldn't pay. Cathy's preschool assumed her mom was the nanny when she went to enroll her in the school and asked several times for "Dr. ...". Cathy's mother had to prove that she was the person they were asking for. She has also been stopped and questioned by police even though she was wearing similar attire to everyone else around her.

When she was in high school, Cathy was falsely accused of being a truant by police officers at a Brooklyn subway station, and they asked for her ID. She did not have her ID that day and never in her wildest dreams thought she needed one in New York City, and she was scared. She had thought those were just stories that happened to other people, but was forced to face hard facts that day, and she cried on her way to school.

Cathy and I were once separated at an airport because people didn't believe we were a couple, prompting us to have a long conversation about her taking my last name just so TSA workers would believe us. When we go to a predominantly white neighborhood, even in "progressive" New York City or Boston, she is acutely aware that people are staring at her. She is never so aware of her Blackness as she is in those moments.

When she has expressed that she has encountered microaggressions to our white friends and family members, they dismiss her remarks out of hand, citing their own perceptions and experiences or those of a token Black friend or family member. Yet when she shares the same incidents with Black friends and family members, no one questions that those actions are racist, and many express that they have experienced similar things. There is a chasm between perceptions of Black and white people on racism in America.

While thankfully none of these incidents were violent, they were all traumatic for her. That pyramid that's circulating on social media with examples of overt and covert racism was triggering for her to see. Like most Black people in America, she has experienced many of those things on both halves of the pyramid, and will continue to experience them for the foreseeable future.

During the height of the protests, whenever she went to work we would text back and forth to formulate her exit strategy from the lab back home.



Cathy as a child
on a playground in
Montauk, N.Y.

ON THE STREET,
PEOPLE CAN'T
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BLACK PERSON.

We monitored social media and looked online to make sure everything was safe and that the bridges were open. I would walk to the Brooklyn Bridge to pick her up, which was surrounded by police. This is our new routine. But it's not going to stop. She's an essential worker. She still has to go in, no matter what's going on outside.

Soon after I met Cathy's mom almost 10 years ago, she sat me down and we had a frank conversation about what it's like to be in a relationship with a Black person. About the things Cathy has to always be aware of, and that I needed to be aware of as her partner. About how she always needs to dress to the nines and speak "properly," and how she can never fully let her guard down when she is outside of her home. The underlying stress and anxiety and transgenerational trauma that shortens lifespans. Things that I could never possibly fathom as a white man in America.

Recently, at her former high school, an Instagram account was created called Black at Brearley, where current and former Black students have been posting about the racism they encountered while attending one of the most prestigious and "progressive" private schools in New York City. One of the posts that resonated with her the most was: "I want to recognize that I have forgotten many [specific encounters with anti-Black racism]. Racism was such an inevitable and routine part of my experience...that it became normalized in my psyche to the point where I didn't even register and remember when it confronted me."

Just because I'm married to a Black woman certainly does not mean I can empathize with Black people. It does not mean I can speak for Black people, nor can I speak for all non-Black people.

But not being particularly new to this conversation—and after having many conversations with family, friends, colleagues, and conducting personal research—what I can do is offer my fellow non-Black folks some steps you can take to be a more effective ally:

Take your anxious energy and put it toward something productive. I know we're swamped at work. I know a lot of us have kids that need education, entertainment, care, and time. I know a lot of us aren't eating or sleeping well. I know a lot of us are anxious and depressed. And it's hard to know where to start.

It's important to remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint. You're not going to be able to learn everything there is to know about anti-Black racism in a week, a month, or even a year.

8 MINUTES A DAY

- Sign petitions (you can even sign them together on a group Zoom call to make it social)
- Donate
- Contact local elected officials
- Organize
- Protest or hand out water, food, masks and first aid kits to protestors
- Support Black-owned businesses
- If you have consumed Black culture recently (you have), support a local Black artist
- Vote, and register other people to vote
- Talk to your family, even (or especially) if it's uncomfortable
- Talk to your children
- Talk to your colleagues
- Start a book club or film club
- Watch President Obama's video and read President Bush's statement on policing and racism, both available online
- Watch the episode of "Last Week Tonight" with John Oliver about the history of policing in America
- Watch the online video series "Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man"
- Hold your friends and family accountable for keeping up the momentum
- Share resources
- Say their names
- Don't equate protestors with looters
- Don't assume your Black friends and colleagues want to talk about race relations, police brutality, about your privilege, or educational resources. At least not right this second. Some Black folks may want to have honest, open conversations about it. For others it can be exhausting, othering and tokenizing—especially if you haven't reached out to them in a while. But also don't disengage altogether just because you're afraid of saying the wrong thing.
- Go ahead and check Twitter. Read the news. Pay attention to what the police and government are doing. Staying informed is vital. But it's equally important to not let it consume and paralyze you. Scrolling through your feed for three hours before you go to bed because you're feeling guilty and anxious doesn't help anyone (I'm for sure guilty of this). Your mental health is important—we all have to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Set daily limits and boundaries on your news intake.
- Join volunteer clean-ups of your neighborhood after protests (bring your friends!)
- Think twice before posting photos and videos of police brutality. While it's important for non-Black folks to see them, they can be triggering or traumatizing for people of color to see. It is and has been daily reality for them—it's not something they need to be reminded of.
- Ask yourself truthfully: how many Black and brown people am I following on social media? Am I getting a true variety of perspectives?
- Before you post about all the good stuff you're doing, think about if it's actually helping or if it's really to gain outside validation/make you feel better about yourself. We have a moral obligation to help reverse four centuries of systemic racism. You shouldn't get extra credit for doing the right thing. Be an ally even (and especially) when no one is looking.

But if everyone reading this takes (at minimum) eight minutes—the same amount of time that Derek Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd's neck – out of their day, every day, to be an ally, we can make a real difference. Posting a Black square is all well and good, but the work doesn't stop there.

It might not seem like much, but daily activism is already making a difference. States and cities are passing commonsense police reform and hate crime laws; more police officers are being fired and arrested for using excessive force. Corporations are starting to fight anti-Black racism and re-examine their roles in perpetuating racial inequality. Statues of Confederate leaders are being torn down across the country. Black Lives Matter protests have spread internationally. Perhaps most important, people around the world are getting off the sidelines and talking about racial injustice in a manner that would have been unfathomable just a few months ago.

There is a public reckoning and reflection that is happening in real time, in front of our eyes that has not happened in a generation. The progress is slow and it's nowhere close to enough. And there will be an inevitable backlash from those that benefit from the current societal structure, but it's still progress.

In our short-attention-span society, it will be easy to rest on our laurels and to turn our attention to the next big news story or controversy. We will justify that pivot by pointing to the incremental changes made during this time and pat ourselves on the back for being a small part of it. It will slowly disappear from our push notifications. Protests will reduce in size. Facebook and Instagram stories will go back to their normal programming of bread-making. It will disappear from the zeitgeist as it did after Charlottesville, and after the murders of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Michael Brown and countless others.

That moment will be the most critical time to stay focused and active. Complacency is a major threat to progress. Don't stop just because your friends and family have stopped. Don't settle for half measures. Racism, systematic oppression, the KKK, unconscious bias and microaggressions will all still exist. Those things don't rest, and neither should we. In order to create sustained, meaningful change, we have to keep up the momentum.

This right here is a *moment*. One day your children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren will ask you what you did during this time. What do you want your answer to be?

So let's all do better. Let's get to work. Let's put in our eight minutes each day. ♦