

You Better Ask Somebody

I want to start by thanking the AAYLC board for inviting me this morning. My name is Mekhi Gardner, and I'm a junior at De La Salle North Catholic High School in Portland. I'm here to tell you a little bit about myself. But before we get started with that, I want to get a better sense of who's in the building. Raise your hand if you're in 6th grade. 7th grade. 8th grade. Freshman. Sophomore. Junior (shout out my juniors!). How bout seniors? Wish I were y'all, I can't wait to graduate. But that's besides the point; let's get started.

When I found out I'd have the opportunity to come out here and speak, I was particularly excited because of my family history at OSU. I'm a Beaver by blood. My grandparents on my mom's side went here, met here, and fell in love here. My grandpa's OSU story is especially interesting. His name was Fred Milton. He was a football player in the 60s, during an OSU era when the football team was dubbed the "Giant Killers." They got that name because they upset USC and Purdue, who were ranked 1 and 2 in the country. My grandpa, a wide-chested linebacker standing at a solid 5'10", was one of the more important players on the team. I know it sounds like I'm bragging, but it's important to the story, I promise. He made waves on the team, his teammates followed his example yadda yadda, you get the story. All these attributes made him a coach's favorite.

At the time, the Beavers were coached by Dee Andros. My grandpa had a lot of respect for him, and Coach Andros had a lot of respect for my grandfather. That's part of what made their eventual conflict such a big deal. The story, as I've always heard it, is that Dee Andros was a very stand-up, by-the-book kind of guy. Rules and regulations were important to him. For the most part, so was my grandpa. But one issue they butted heads on was my grandpa's facial hair.

According to the rules and regulations, his goatee was not acceptable. So, Coach Andros told my grandpa he had to shave it off.

But my grandpa wasn't too keen on this idea. He felt his facial hair was an important part of his heritage, culture, and self-expression. And, in his opinion, this order was just the latest in a long list of double standards & extra hoops to jump through which were being applied unfairly to black athletes and students. So, when Coach Andros told him to get rid of the goatee, he said no. As y'all can imagine, that didn't go too well. How many of y'all in the room play sports? Ok, now how many of y'all tell your coaches no without consequences? Right, that's what I thought. We got a couple of brave souls out there, but most hands went down. Personally, if I ever told my football coach no like that, especially about a rule like that, I'd find myself running until he couldn't breathe. However, because of my grandpa's demeanor, performance, and relationship with Coach Andros, there wasn't any running. Instead, they had a long, long conversation one off-season afternoon. Neither of them budged. So, ole gramps ended up being removed from the team, having his scholarship revoked, and being kicked out of OSU.

Another thing I should mention about my grandpa is that he was popular. Which meant when he was kicked out, other people rallied behind him. The Oregon State University Black Student Union, in particular, was not too happy about the whole situation. As a result of his unfair treatment, they staged a walkout. At the time, OSU had a very small number of black students. There were 57 BSU members, and 5 other black football players in the whole university. Of the 57 registered for the fall semester, only 18 returned for the spring semester. Of the 5 black football players, only 2 came back for spring ball. Now, these events were a big blow to Oregon State. The University of Oregon got involved. The incident made national news and was at the center of a campus discourse that drew thousands of people. It highlighted some of the

racial injustices on campus. The surrounding city of Corvallis mostly sided with Coach Andros and made their voices heard, but my grandpa and people who supported him continued to stand firm.

Eventually, they started to make some progress towards resolution. The OSU faculty senate established a new “Committee on Human Rights” that was tasked with examining the double standards, extra hoops, and racial unfairness that my grandfather and the BSU were hoping to point out. These events were some of the things that led to the establishment of the Black Cultural Center in 1971. If you go in there today, you’ll see a painting of my grandpa on the wall. Though he passed in 2011. I believe his impact on this university and this state set the groundwork for how I view the world.

Now, fast-forwarding from 1969 to 2023, I’d like to tell y’all a little bit about my football career. So like I said, my grandpa was a bit of a phenom. His son, my uncle, was the star running back of Central Catholic. And my dad was a bigwig back in his day, too. Yet, I didn’t take to a love of football so quickly. How many of y’all have been playing sports since like 1st grade? 2nd? 3rd? Ok, how about middle school? 6th? 7th? 8th? Ok, some of y’all started young. Me? I started my freshman summer. Sophomore year was my first football season. And let me tell you, it was not pretty.

When I say that I embarrassed myself daily, I mean every practice, I did something dumb. I couldn’t catch. Could barely throw. I’m pretty athletic, but I was just confused all the time. I started the season, so I wanted to finish it, but man, oh man, did I want to quit sometimes. Like, for example, one day we were doing “Oklahoma drill,” which for those of y’all who don’t know is a game where you run full speed at your teammate and try to tackle them in a really tight amount of space. For whatever reason, my coaches decided it was a good idea to do this the first

day we got pads. So here I am, newbie player, in pads for the first time, having my first real tackle experience. Most of my team was smart; they knew who to go up with and who to avoid. Me? Not so much. All these people were new to me. My school doesn't have a football team, so I was playing for the public school where I didn't know anyone. I was also really shy and really nervous. I would only step up when no one else did because I didn't wanna take someone else's spot. Do we see the problem? Here I am, my first real contact in my life, and I see everyone clear out when this one guy steps in. I'm like "man, here's my chance, I'll just get it over with, won't take no one else's spot, no harm, no foul."

To paint the picture a little better, I was like half the size I am now. The guy I was going up against was our starting defensive end, who I later found out had a reputation for being rough. To save myself just a little bit, I'll show you what happened next rather than tell you. Roll the tape! Ok, now in case anyone missed that, let's go slowly this time. Right. So as y'all can see, I was almost knocked clean out. Not really, but my reputation was definitely very bruised. I left practice that day and had to do some soul searching.

I wanted to quit. I did not see myself coming back to practice ever again. But, in my soul searching, I found myself wandering back to the lessons I learned from my grandpa's story. I decided I needed to stand firm. For him, that meant advocating for justice even when it risked his career. For me, that meant coming back and showing up fully after that sorry display.

The next day, I did indeed go to practice (with some encouragement from my parents), and I started trying to take some tips and tricks from my grandpa. Firstly, I realized I needed to ask more questions. I know everyone in here has had the experience of not knowing what's going on. I got a little too comfortable with that feeling, to the point that I didn't ask many questions about tackling technique. We see where that got me. After that fiasco, I started speaking up more.

Secondly—and I want everyone to remember this one—I started talking to folks. I reached out more to my teammates. I reached out more to my coaches. I started to build more relationships. That meant that the next time, I was about to do something stupid, I might have someone who would pull me aside and help me make a better choice. In fact, working on that habit is how I ended up speaking to y’all today.

One way I’ve learned to reach out to others is by sending cold emails. If I see someone doing something I’m interested in or want to get involved in, I’ll shoot them an email even if I’ve never met them. Now I won’t get too political, but after the recent election, I had some feelings. First, I got mad. Then, I got a little sad. Then I ended up really motivated. I started reaching out to people because I wanted to get involved and actually do something. I reached out to people in law and politics. I reached out to people in research. And, I reached out to people in public health. Because of that, I ended up sending an email to someone at the Oregon Public Health Association. I introduced myself, my interests, and my enthusiasm. Then, my email got sent up the chain, and I had a meeting with the Executive Director of the organization, who brought a surprise guest: Ms. Joann Miller, who is the President of OPHA as well as the treasurer for this conference. We got to know each other briefly, and she invited me to be a speaker today. I want to quickly shout her out: Thank you, Ms. Miller! It was a surprise to me, but it was in keeping with another thing I’ve learned in life. In my experience, most adults like young people who are excited. If you show some interest, a little bit of responsibility, and a willingness to get involved, most adults will do what they can to help you. All it takes is you reaching out.

Now, to wrap this all up, you might notice that there are a lot of people here. That means that there are a lot of adults who do a lot of different things sitting in this room. In fact, I’m almost positive that whatever each of you is interested in doing for a career or a hobby, there’s

someone in here who does that. So, given that, I think each of y'all has the opportunity to talk to somebody and ask some questions. Today! And you better get to them before I do because I know that personally, I'm leaving here with 6 emails, 3 phone numbers, and a meeting next week. One person I'm going to make sure I hit up is Bryan Butcher, Oregon Teacher of the Year, and your next speaker. Everyone give it up for Mr. Butcher!