

Nikki:

Right. For sure. So I want to advance this a little bit further and jump into the letter. And so, your letter, really your father, your grandfather, but can you just briefly share about your children and their ages?

Michael:

Yes. One thing and one of the other issues of my life I had to navigate, some folks I've shared this with, I had a daughter when I was in high school. My daughter, my oldest daughter is now 44 years old and who actually went to college herself and graduated and has two children. So she's 44. I have a daughter who's almost 26, a son who is now who just turned 22. I actually I have two stepsons, 26 and 23 and my grandchildren are 20. My granddaughter will be a junior in college. And my grandson whose name happens to be Michael, he'll be, Oh God, he'll be 12 next month.

Nikki:

Excellent. So what do you recall about your conversations with your children with respect to race and racism and how some in the world might perceive them because they were black?

Michael:

You know, this was always challenging and very difficult because again, we want to, we, myself and my wife, you want to teach your children that the world should be colorblind, that there are no impediments to their success, that there is, you should be proud of your culture. And we educated them, had them read about black history and tell them about the issues of race. But we had to balance that with being realistic and letting them know that there may be times where people are going to judge them because of the color of their skin.

Michael:

And while it was, every generation has changed, while the racism was a bit more open and hostile with the generation before me, it had become less so with our children. Many of them who are now had dealt in a world where we're far more politically correct, people aren't calling you names directly. There more interracial friendships and folks understand that, some of them, many of them understand that racism is wrong. And so we had to sort of try to get them to understand, to embrace people who reach out to them and want to be their friends. But at the same time, they had to look for the signs.

Michael:

All of you may know about the talk. Almost every black parent has to have the talk. And by the way, those discussions you've mentioned with our children started had to start pretty early. They start when they were in grade school, but again, they were delicate, but then we had to have the talk when they have to be a certain age, particularly when they started to drive. And for those of you who don't know, who may not understand the talk, every black parent here, every black person on this phone understands what the talk is. And the talk is that we have to tell our children that when they confront or meet a police officer, they have to be careful where they put their hands, they have to careful how they move. They have to be careful what they say, because a sudden movement could lead to catastrophic effect and or tragic effect.

Michael:

And that's a difficult conversation to have with them because they didn't really experience that same thing because no one treated them that way, treated them other than with respect so they saw for the most part, but we do. And we had to get them prepared for a world in which they would have to confront these issues possibly, okay. And we had to make sure that they were safe.

Nikki:

And so then that really brings us to the letter. And so when did you realize that you needed to write a black father's letter to his black son? Was it a midnight hour of revelation? Was it the result of quiet meditation?

Michael:

It was no. I mean, I was thinking about writing a letter to him anyway, I plan to, but my son is just a good kid. He did everything right. In the letter, I sort of write about sort of his goodness and how he judge people and his diversity of friendships. And when this murder took place, I saw a side of him I'd never seen before. Unlike his father, I mean, he is calm, he's deliberate, he's thoughtful. And I saw his emotions, I saw him just feeling hurt and angry at not simply what happened, but at every time he listened to certain people on television sort of talk about it and describe it and focus on ancillary issues rather than on the injustices that he saw. I saw something that, I saw pain in him that I had never seen before.

Michael:

And he said something to me that really resonated in character. I'm someone who's spent my life thinking, working toward a sort of racial justice and a society that would be more equitable. And he knew that, but he said something to me that really struck a chord. He looked at me and said, "Dad, you're not taking this seriously enough." And I realized there was nothing. What could I say to put all this in perspective for him? Because one, I didn't want him to... This was a boy who just loves of people, but he was hit hard with something he kind of sort of knew in the abstract. He knew that there were racist things that had happened that were going on in the world, but this hit home. And for the first time I saw in his eyes, he said, "I'm vulnerable. I can be, this could be me."

Michael:

And we had, his birthday was coming up and we tried to do a Zoom birthday celebration with his sisters and family. He turned it off. He couldn't do it. He couldn't celebrate because he said, "I can't, I can't enjoy this moment." And that's when I knew I had to put, so I thought I'm going to put something in writing to him. Number one, to tell him I feel his pain, number two, to give him at least my views, thoughts about guidance and how we, as black people in America, black men in America, how we should address this and how we need to acknowledge it. But we need to work in collectively with and collaborate with other people who are good people who want to see these changes too. And so I figured the most effective way, because he wasn't hearing me talk. So the most effective way was to try to put it in writing for him. And so that's what sort of prompted the letter.

Nikki:

So how did you share it with him? And then what was his response?

Michael:

I gave it to him, just gave it to him and said, "Son, I want you to read it." And he's very reserved said, "That's a good letter, dad." That's all he said. And I said, "Well, I mentioned to a few people that I'm thinking about publishing it." And he said, "You should publish it." He didn't talk much, but here's what I observed. I observed his emotion, an emotional change. I saw him being uplifted. And I saw that sparkle in his eye and that hope in his eye. And I also saw where he started talking about what he can do as a young man. He started going out. He went out to the matches, which surprised me and protested himself.

Michael:

And so that was a positive sign because again, my son is not the most verbal in terms of his emotions, but it's sort of our way of communicating our feelings to each other and for him to know that there's hope for him and that not just me, but there are other black parents, parents of black and brown children around the world who are going through the same thing, who have the same fears and who are going to, or whose job it is to make sure that they can succeed, that they can navigate around the world and that we are going to fight and make sure that is not going to be one of them who will be at the receiving end of a horrific act by not just as I call them a real or a folk police officer by anyone else and that is the battle that we're going to fight. And we will enlist everyone in that fight with us and he's encouraged.

Nikki:

Yeah. And that's where we have to go with it. And we have to sort of take from the pain and the anger and try to create something positive, some positive change out of that. So I wanted then talk and switch a little bit. So can you share then, and I think you've touched upon it, but just elaborate a little bit as of today, fears and worries for your children and what are your hopes for them?

Michael:

Well, my fears are the same. First of all, they're the same fears that every parent has for a child. Every parent worries about their children and wants to make sure that they are safe and they are protected and that they get every opportunity that is available and they're treated fairly and equitably. And we have as a black parent, we have those same fears, but we have these additional fears.

Michael:

And those additional fears are number one is, as we've been talking about to make sure that when they go out in society, that the color of their skin, simply the color of their skin is not going to put them in a position where someone's going to harm them or hurt them for no cause or for little cause. But also the fear that I also worry that they will, are able to recognize that where there are barriers, there are discriminatory barriers, that they see them and that they know how to work around them. But at the same time they're understanding that there are no excuses to doing your best and succeeding. Those are expectations irrespective of the color of your skin, but you may have more obstacles than anyone else.

Michael:

And as I was thinking of this, this reminds me again, I have tons of stories, but my grandson who is five, maybe six years old, was going to a Catholic school. He had, as kids do, had a little dispute with a white child and it caused the teacher to bring in the parents. And they met with the head of the school. My five, picture this five, six-year-old, young, black boy, sweet. She, teacher told them that she feared for

her life around him. And we, know this is real. And we've often, many of us have, it's been written about this sort of this irrational fear of young black men. This kid, he was five, he's six years old, but this was her view of a five or six-year-old boy.

Michael:

And so it reinforced this idea that we still have a lot of work to do, that there's still these irrational feelings that some folks have about people based on the color of their skin. And we have to prepare, unfortunately prepare our children for that. And we have to continue to work to sort of get rid of these ideas, these notions that not only I think impact our children, but they're impacting sort of a generation of people and prevent us from sort of moving on to a society I think that most people want.

Nikki:

Very true. So thank you for that. And we didn't go over all of the testimonies that you were going to share. And I can say that the one about your grandson is difficult to hear. It's not that I have not heard things similar to that before, but to imagine, I have a seven-year-old and when I tell you she is sweet as ice cream, I mean just sweet as ice cream. And so to think that someone would, an adult would find her aggressive enough to say that he or she feared for their lives in her presence is literally unimaginable. So that's a lot. So we'll try to take this last portion of time to talk about your life as a professional. So this is almost rhetorical, but not really. Did you face any obstacles as an attorney or professional who happens to be black? And can you share any particularly memorable stories?

Michael:

Oh, wow. Well, so many. There were one first of all, and when you get, some of us get an opportunity to work in a large, predominantly white corporate institution, first is we find that many of us don't, we're sort of not adopted by anyone or any team of people on a consistent basis. So we kind of go from assignment to assignment with not the ability to really, to prove yourself on a consistent basis then. And you can get the feeling oftentimes because you're not really being seen. I have been partner in the firm thought I worked in the mailroom. I've had as a partner I have had employees at my firm who thought, asked if I worked in the mailroom. And if I could pick something up for them. Of the few black men who were at the law firm, how often we were confused with one another, when we look nothing alike, which sort of makes you wonder, are people really looking at you?

Michael:

So trying to navigate through a system that is difficult by the way, it transcends race. It doesn't matter the profession, trying to move through a institution and to become a partner or whatever the next levels are, it's challenging for anyone, but those are just issues that we simply have to deal with, but I'm going to give you, because I have so many, I'm going to give you two stories. One is, when I was a young partner, I had a client and an opportunity to get a transaction. So I took one of my senior transactional partners with me and a young transactional partner.

Michael:

So the senior partner was going to drive. I got the car after them. They were in the front seat. So an hour and a half up there, they spent the entire time talking about vacationing in Maine. The young partner talked about his family, having a house in Maine. I barely knew where Maine was. I mean, it's in the Northeast. I've never been to Maine, but that entire trip, they talked about things that they had in common that they could share with one another. That was not a conversation, that was not a

connection that I could make with them on a personal level. And these are impediments across the board to us as we've moved through law firms.

Michael:

The second was, again, this is 10 years ago when I was coming in as a chance for the bar association. I was going into, most people knew me, but there was a big dinner, annual dinner from a big organization, legal organization in town. I won't mention the name. So I go in, I'm dressed. I think I'm looking kind of sharp actually. And as I'm walking in, there was a young white woman who I thought was a young lawyer who asked me if I could come over. And I thought wanted introduce herself, talk about what my plans were. Well, she's sitting at the table and she starts pointing the two empty glasses. Her and the man, the young man, white man in front of her. And I will, I said, "Do you think I work here? I'm a server? You thought I was a server."

Michael:

She made that stereotype, that assumption that I'm a black man in this predominantly white crowd. So I couldn't be a lawyer. I'm not going to be a chance of the bar. I walked across and I went around the table, it was one of our state's supreme court justices. And I mentioned that story to her. And of course the woman had left. She was embarrassed because she knew. And I don't think she meant any harm, but the fact is those are still realities, that there are stereotypes and assumptions made about who we are. That they're still, that it's not surprising that to see us working in mailrooms or working as janitors, but still it's still, we are still exceptions as black professionals.

Michael:

And so those are things that we continue to have to adjust. Time has changed somewhat, but there still are, still these sort of personal, these personal connections and what they mean and the success and how much it means to the success of any person who comes through these doors. It's still important. I made it because I had two mentors who were senior partners in the firm who sort of adopted me and recognize that I have some skills and they didn't call it on me. They scolded me if I didn't do things right. They praise me when I did things right. But they made sure that they developed me and work toward my development as a professional. Those opportunities for us as we sort of climb through these, as we try to sort of navigate through these professional institutions, unfortunately, still exist, that...

Nikki:

Yeah. I mean, similar experiences. I have been the court reporter. I have been the judicial assistant. And as I share with people, those are excellent jobs. They feed families. Good work to have. But the indication that I make is that it's not that you assume that I am a judicial assistant and that's not a good profession. It is why wouldn't you assume that I am there to conduct business as a lawyer? Why do you assume that a woman or the woman of color in the courtroom is the court reporter, because that really could be the only reason she's there unless she's maybe a criminal defendant if I did that kind of work. So we're getting close to about our 10-minute mark. So I want to kind of fast forward to our two final questions before we answer a few questions that came through the chat. So why do you think race and racism has been what seems like an intractable challenge in America?

Michael:

Well, I think one, I think in some circles it's deeply rooted. There are, and I think intellectually that there are some people in America who still will not accept the fact that racism is a move, it's wrong. And will

accept the fact that our values as you humans, our values as being part of the human race, that if the value to the anti-racism, that that kind of society is not something that we want. But even when we get to the point, and this is the more difficult one, because we get to the point where you can intellectualize it, we still have, there's still people who emotionally have a difficult time addressing it.

Michael:

It's uncomfortable to deal with it. It's work. It means that you have to change the status quo. It means that I have to do more than go to work every day and work hard and take care of my family, that I have to re-examine and examine who I am as a person and whether or not I harbor certain biases that are preventing me from fully embracing people who don't look like me and giving them fair and equitable opportunities. That is work. And some people, and I think there are folks who just don't want to engage in that because it's hard, it's uncomfortable.

Nikki:

And would you say that it can also be an intractable challenge in the practice of law?

Michael:

Well, it transcends all aspects of society, that many of our, that in the practice of any profession, that it is, it is hard work. That to recognize that when people act black, people come into a predominantly white institution where the structure is in place where historical relationships have been established, that we come in and we have to assimilate. That is our job to assimilate to the structure of the culture of that firm. But there's no reciprocal obligation on the other part for anyone else, for our white colleagues to say, well, I need to do a better job of understanding them and getting to know what their issues are and appreciating what the issues are and understand when we talk about, and we're sharing them.

Michael:

It's not that we're whining that we want special treatment. We understand first and foremost that we have to perform. We have to perform as well as you, but the standards are not always the same, are not always fair. They're not applied fair. And that the subjectivity that's involved, those personal connections that are involved, we don't always get. And it impacts sometimes and it impacts our ability to sort of move on to the next level and to succeed. And I would venture to say that most of us who have succeeded it's because we have made that connection with someone that has opened up and made that connection with us and giving us a fair opportunity and allow us to make a mistake every now and then. And that's key.

Nikki:

Thank you. So our final question, before we go to our listeners, what would you say to anyone listening about how they can be a part of changing this reality of racism and inequitable treatment for millions of black and brown people in the United States?

Michael:

Well, one, it goes back to one, we have to, you have to be willing to accept a little bit of discomfort or a lot of discomfort. And we almost, I mean, I believe that this generation is one in which we have to be willing to make, if we really do want to see the next generation where there is no discrimination or minimal, or we're containing it, if that's a society we really want, then we've got to make some sacrifices now. And that means that we have to be willing to change the status quo. We have to be willing to

examine who we are and take and do the hard work that's necessary to do that and to accept and acknowledge the pain that people are feeling and the hurdles, the extra hurdles that they have to jump over, to sort of make it.

Michael:

And the other thing, and some folks I've said this to one or two people, they think I'm being naive, but I think we have to start insisting on something, just like we, as we measure these subjective measurements of skill and intelligence, we start needing to demand, insist that there needs to be a level of cultural competency that is demonstrated by leaders, by people. And by cultural competency I mean, not just saying the right thing, but they have demonstrated that they are open, they're willing, they're learning about different, not just black people, but about different cultures, different things, and understanding how I can be part of this change. Not making it easier for them, but understand them.

Michael:

And insist that if they're not there, if people aren't demonstrating that type of cultural competency irrespective of what other values we think they may bring that there needs to be, I think some penalty, penalties assessed and possibly, maybe these aren't people who really have the values, if we say these are the values that we hold as an institution. And I mean, every institution, every organization, every police department, and these are values that come out of our mouth. If we really mean them, then to make those kinds of changes, we've got to insist, we've got to demand that people are demonstrating that, and that has simply not been the case throughout history. That has not been the criteria or an important one.

Michael:

And I'm as naive as it may be, I think that this generation is one that really has to say, has to make that decision because leadership does move people. Those demonstrated leadership does move people. And if we're not insisting on it, then there's nothing that will encourage or motivate other people to do that.

Nikki:

Okay. Thank you for that, Michael. So we're going to stop the recording now, but then go to the questions in the queue. So thank you. We'll stop the recording.