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The Long Way Home: Mr. Fletcher

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Mr. Fletcher

EVERY TIME I JOG UP A STREET OR DOWN A TRAIL, I IMAGINE MY TRACK coach Lamont Fletcher yelling across the cinder track of Princeton High School, “Lower your arms!”

He’s reminding me to use my arms so they help—not to swing them high in wide circles across to the other side of my body just because I feel tired.

That was in 1974. Mr. Fletcher was a 30-something kindergarten teacher who coached the high school girls’ track and field team. I was 15 that spring and was running the mile. Title IX had allowed my friends and me to run on the boys’ cross-country team in the fall and the boys’ winter track team. Now it was spring, and we had our own team.

I had no idea what I might be capable of. Mr. Fletcher and my friends on the team, especially one tough runner named Kathy Woodbridge, pushed me to run until my legs felt like gum and my lungs burned. Running competitively felt very grown-up. I became obsessed with getting better. Mr. Fletcher was instilling toughness you must learn if you want to be an athlete. That



kind of push-through-it attitude transcends the track and seeps into daily life. Mr. Fletcher's track team is the reason I'm editing this journal because I doubt I would have tried backpacking long distances without what he taught me about running.

He was the first Black adult I knew well, the first to help me move beyond racist attitudes I'd absorbed from my ancestors down through my grandparents, who at that time were still using derogatory terms to refer to Blacks. I knew from early childhood that skin color was not an indicator of anything, that it should not matter, and yet that it had caused wars and division and suffering. But at age 15 I still didn't know that I could be the change our teachers told us must occur. I was descended from middle- and lower-class whites from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Their entrenched racism, which I believe my parents were working to change in themselves, could not evaporate overnight.

In our town, people of all races worked, shopped, and went to school together, but we did not live together. Princeton's Black neighborhood clustered around Witherspoon Street in an eighteen-block area near my high school. I lived about a mile from there in the Riverside Drive neighborhood, a 1950s subdivision that was nearly totally white. My mother told me once that real estate agents maintained something like an under-the-radar segregation by showing Black families only certain houses. Our schools had been officially integrated since 1948. The school board transported Black children to all the elementary schools to put us together, and we made some friends early on. At least we had that, although I know that it wasn't a perfect solution.

I didn't know what I didn't know back then, as the saying goes. I wanted to learn how to be friends with Blacks in my schools but had no idea how to extend my hand. I did a terrible job considering why Black peers looked at me cautiously. In seventh grade I once thoughtlessly offended three Black girls during gym class. Their basketball rolled out of bounds. I was resting on the side (more like, trying to get out of playing) and went to grab it for them. They asked me to give it back, but because I was in the process of giving it back, I immediately went on the defensive and stuck my tongue out. One of them followed me as we walked out to the field, told me basically that I had a bad attitude, and punched my arm. I deserved it. The girl who punched me was one of the best athletes in the school. I was afraid to get to know her.

Lamont Fletcher, second from left in the back row, with the Princeton High School girls' track team, 1974. I'm to his left with arms crossed. PRINCETON HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK PHOTO

On the high school track team a few years later, Mr. Fletcher taught me through his absolute joy in life, and his belief that I could win the mile run every time, that the world is a small place. In the yearbook picture of our team from that spring, we're huddled by the track in our practice sweats. I've got my arms crossed self-consciously in that way teens stand when they've only just realized that they can do something hard. Mr. Fletcher is standing behind me and another girl, grinning, trying to get us to lighten up.

Mr. Fletcher had grown up in Princeton. He said in an interview a few years ago for Kathryn Watterson's book *I Hear My People Singing: Voices of African American Princeton* (Princeton University Press, 2017) that he lacked professional role models growing up in the 1950s. "There were a few Black teachers in schools, but very few," he said. "There are fewer now in Princeton regional schools." He was one of them.

He taught me and all the track girls how to run hard, persevere, and laugh. He trusted us; one summer day, my mom and I babysat his kids. He also illustrated when we should stop joking around and get to work. And he told me things I didn't want to hear. Like the day I ran in the state final for the mile run. They called it the Meet of Champions. Mr. Fletcher was frustrated that the meet's rules relegated the coaches up into the bleachers, so I was alone with the nine other runners at the start. I felt completely alone. I was not sure, somehow, that I belonged there. The starting gun fired. I was moving. Just kind of moving and trying to stay close to the legs in front of me. I ran five seconds slower than my best mile and came in seventh out of ten. The whole thing felt like a weird dream.

I put on my sweats and climbed up the back stairs to the high bleachers and found Mr. Fletcher. He was shaking his head. He said something like he could tell the second the gun went off that I didn't think I belonged there and wasn't running my best. I disagreed vehemently. Eventually I realized that he was right. I hadn't. Sometimes the coach is the only one who can say the tough stuff.

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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