



Hello! Can I Help You?

By Gina Duquenne, April 05, 2021

In 1933, my great-grandmother, grandmother, uncle, two great aunts and my mom, who was 3, packed up everything they owned in a truck and a couple of cars and joined the Negro migration from Texas to California to escape the racial violence and bigotry of the South.

My great-grandmother and grandmother cleaned white peoples' houses and did folks' laundry. My mother married young, and my sister and I grew up in Los Angeles.

I worked hard growing up and eventually owned an event coordination business in Los Angeles. At one point, I visited Ashland and liked the small-town ambiance and knew I was ready to leave my life in the fast lane.

I drove up to Ashland and toured the Ashland Springs Hotel and thought, "if I want to work for somebody else, I could see myself working in this environment." I called the general manager and requested an interview. Within days, I was hired. The general manager said, "You can go back to L.A., move here with your husband and start work immediately."

"I don't have a husband. I have a wife," I replied. Without missing a beat, he said, "Move up with your wife, congratulations." I was heartened by the full acceptance and being embraced by a prominent local business that I am a Black queer woman. That was 2007.

Living in Ashland is a whole different matter. During the first year I received automatic Oregon Shakespeare Festival member discounts in most businesses. That was until I was told that I was so magnificent in a particular play. I said I was never in that play, and I am not an actor. Most residents assumed Black people do not live in Ashland, we only belong on the stage or just visiting from out of town. It was not even in their consciousness that Black people could be their neighbors.

I shopped at an upscale store in town, and I was followed by a salesperson. I turned around and said, "Hello! Can I help you?" Embarrassed, she turned away.

So many times, I would be on the phone at work, speaking to someone and we were hitting it off famously. Then, when they came to see me in person I got "the look. I just kept talking. I am that same person on the phone. This is who I am. I would think to myself, put your shoulders down, take a deep breath, and smile. When I see that the person got through the initial shock and smiled, it made my day. I always confront "the look" by extending my hand and smiling.

We just celebrated Black History month; however, Black history is American history. So many people live in silos and are not aware of the true history and the culture of my people, so they do not know about microaggression and their own personal biases. I encourage and challenge them to educate themselves and open their mind and not to sweep transgressions under the carpet. Bring it into the light, use it as a teachable moment, learn from it so it does not repeat itself.

I know several groups of white people here in Ashland who have book clubs and go to workshops on racism. I asked if they have Black people in their groups. They said they didn't feel Black people should educate them. I appreciate that, but do read your book, talk to each other, and educate yourself, then close your book and go practice. Go talk to people who don't look like you, have the uncomfortable conversation until it becomes comfortable. Cultures are meant to be shared; conversations are needed to be had.

I was voted in by the people of Ashland for a position on the City Council. One of my goals is to unite us through awareness and education to create an anti-racist Ashland and discover our common grounds.

In the history of Ashland, I am the first Black lesbian council member, but I will not be the last. Ashland is evolving. I feel very optimistic, and I am hopeful.

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