

#ILookLikeASurgeon

Category: Racism

written by Pringl Miller | June 9, 2020

I finished general surgery training in 2002. At that time, it felt like a whole new era in medicine, or so I thought. I was off to solo-private practice in “liberal,” northern California. I had naïve optimism as the first Black graduate of my residency program, one of few Black women practicing general surgery, and the first woman and Black person to practice general surgery at this hospital.

I hired staff and, as we navigated opening the office, I decided it would be helpful to hang news clippings of my professional accomplishments which included photos in the lobby to give patients a heads up about my gender and race. I was intentional about giving patients a warning shot to spare both of us the uncomfortable moment of meeting, that moment when historically there might be an awkward silence, followed by the pensive comment, “Are you the surgeon?”

Once we were up and running, a local newspaper reporter came over to interview me for a feature, “Who’s New in Town?” He and I talked about my personal and professional background, what my interests were, and why I moved to the community. I explained my goal of bringing minimally invasive surgical techniques to an area that lacked them. I also offered some specifics about my husband and daughter, and mentioned I was an avid soccer player.

When the article came out in the newspaper, I was horrified. The reporter focused not on my professional work, but on the fact that I was a black woman married to a white man and enjoyed adult soccer. I couldn’t believe it! Why would a reporter from Marin County, California find those facts presented that way print worthy or appropriate? Was inter-racial marriage still noteworthy? The “adult” soccer reference was also weird, because it read as though I engaged in some form of perverted sports activity.

Needless to say, I got on the horn to speak with the reporter and gave him a piece of my mind, only to have the newspaper render an apology. Was an apology in the paper all that was needed? This racially charged experience left me feeling demoralized and concerned about my future as a member and surgeon in the community. That experience affirmed that the photos in my office lobby were not misplaced and at the same time a damn shame.

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