

## **Profiling in a Progressive City - September 24, 2021**

Two weeks ago, my family and I decided to travel to Boston. We had purchased many things from REI in preparation for our backpacking/hiking trip this summer, and needed to return certain items. We also wanted to visit some good friends and to visit a new city. This was the first time I had been to Boston, a city with a very liberal identity and seen as a pioneer of the construction of a progressive society in this country. I felt confident going there, and I have to say that I don't usually feel the same when traveling to unknown cities in this country.

There we were, driving around this marvelous and multiethnic city. We were just a few blocks away from our first destination, REI. For those of you who don't know what REI is, it is one of the coolest and most progressive stores that sells outdoor equipment. I usually spend a good part of my time browsing its website, adding things to "my cart" that I usually never end up buying. It's a cool store, although things are still very expensive. But I love their messages, their policies, their mission, their pictures. In the past, I have loved being in their stores, touching, trying things, asking questions. I have always felt confident in their stores. It might sound like I am promoting this company, but that is not my point. My point is that even very progressive companies, located in very progressive cities, can still fail by perpetuating racism and discrimination.

While my wife was standing in line getting ready to return all the things we did not use on our trip, our two boys and I were wandering around the store. My kids were looking for some shoes and, as usual, I was just mesmerized by all the things that were on the shelves. I kept wandering, but the more I wandered around, the less comfortable I felt. One by one, five members of the staff "carefully" surrounded me, pretending to organize products on shelves. Five at the same time, in an area no bigger than 200' square feet, and all communicating on their walkie-talkie headsets. Their faces interacted with each other, but I pretended that I was not aware of it. Of course, I had lots of experience with being followed in a store, but they, all white young adults, did not know that.

I was aware of it because that is something that constantly happens to people of color. It constantly happens to me and it hurts. It hurts more when, despite all the information out there, all the beautiful mission statements and pictures in their newsletters, people and institutions continue doing it. It hurts because it changed my family's memories of our trip to Boston. It hurts because perhaps my kids were also being followed. And if not this time, they will be the next time.

After what seemed to be a practiced ritual, one of the five people approached me and said "can I help find you anything?" I remained silent for about five seconds, studying the body expression of the other people. Their hands on their headsets, their eyes on each other, their attention on my skin, my hair, my voice. "NO" I said calmly, "I am just wandering around while my kids and I wait for my wife" (I pointed to my wife who at that time was talking to the cashier) "to finish returning some stuff, but thanks for asking." I felt weak, violated, powerless, dehumanized.

I am sharing this not because I want you to feel sorry for what happened to me, but because these actions continue harming people of color every day. I am sharing this because the effort to construct a racially just society begins with the real commitment of those who are caring for children. But it is up to us, the adults, parents, caregivers, teachers, leaders to make these changes possible now and not wait any longer.

This is not an attack on a particular company, because this also happens in our local stores. In fact, I plan to continue to be a customer of REI, but I also plan on writing them a letter telling them of my experience in one of their stores. This is not just an REI issue, it is a systemic problem in this country. I am sharing this to create awareness about how you can advocate against racism and any other form of bigotry happening to people who are seen as "different", and therefore "dangerous", because we don't fit into the white ethnocentric norm.

Here are some resources for you to start or continue your journey for [Equity, Justice, and Inclusion](#).

Podcast: [The Kids Are All Right](#)

Youtube: [What Dark-Skinned People Will Never Tell You](#)

Article: [The Paris Review - Performing Whiteness](#)

Yupaichani / Gracias / Thank You,

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