



Are You Willing to Get into Good Trouble?

July 17, 2021 by Educator Barnes

On April 4, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was in Indianapolis. He was campaigning for president. Instead of giving a campaign speech, he gave a powerful impromptu speech informing the crowd that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated. Present during this speech was John Lewis who was Kennedy's campaign aide. Later that year Robert F. Kennedy was also assassinated. The Landmark for Peace Memorial, which is located in the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Park in Indianapolis, features both Kennedy and King. This memorial is part of the Kennedy King Memorial Initiative which aims "to raise awareness, provoke thought and inspire action to eliminate division and injustice."

On the 50th anniversary of King's assassination, on April 4, 2018, Congressman John Lewis returned to Indianapolis. He hadn't been back to the park since Kennedy's speech 50 years prior. At the time I was a high school literacy coach and English teacher. I along with other educators and students watched the Kennedy King 50 event where Rep. Lewis was a speaker. He said words that he had said many times before. But that day, I wrote them in a tweet and those words have been my pinned tweet ever since.

"When you see something that's not right, something that is not fair, something that is not just, you have a moral obligation to say something – to do something, you cannot be quiet."

Knowing that we have a moral obligation is important but acting on that moral obligation is the hard part. It has been one year since Rep. Lewis died, and I still believe good trouble is worth it.

A year ago, I wrote "Race and Equity Talks Have Magnified How Emotionally Unsafe I Feel at My School." It resonated with so many readers. It was one of our most viewed pieces of 2020. People across the United States and even in other countries wrote to me. It also pissed off people. Several people shared what I wrote with my principal. I did not care.

Being a journalist is on my resume. Any time I have been hired since I started writing, I have a conversation about what I write and have an agreement in place. My principal told me that the best course of action was not to read anything I ever wrote and that I did not need to worry. That is until she read that article.

I was in training on Zoom for most of the day. During the lunch break, she emailed me and asked if we could talk about what I wrote because she had concerns. After that, we did an icebreaker activity. We were supposed to share an item to share an important aspect about

ourselves. When it was my turn, I held up my journal and made it clear that I am a writer. It is who I am, and I will not censor myself.

I had a choice that day. I could have said I love to garden or love to read, but I had to make it clear that I was no longer willing to be in anyone's box. When we finally talked about the article, she was more concerned about how she looked and how the school looked instead of changing the culture of the school. The previous school year I dealt with confirmed harassment and bullying. Last school year, it only got worse. I had a choice: fall into line or do what was best for teachers and students. I created the Barnes Bubble. That bubble was a safe place for people to talk to me and for me to help. I also made it clear that I was not backing down when I wrote a follow up piece, "I'm Okay with Getting into Good Trouble." Yes, people sent in that article, too.

I decided I could no longer be quiet about the racial microaggressions, lack of school leadership, and dysfunctional environment. Had I not written "Where's Waldo: The Case of the Missing Principal" before I accepted the administrator job of middle school academic dean, people would have probably thought I wrote about my last principal.

While I was working hard each day, I was making an exit strategy and I helped others leave. I connected people to my contacts to help them find a new job. Do you know how dangerous it is to help people leave a job when you are an administrator at the school? It was clear there was a target on my back because I demanded change. When the people in HR tell you to get out of the school because the executive director does not want change and is in denial about the issues, you should listen. I will never forget when the executive director asked me, "Do you really think this is about race?" Let me think. Yes, it is. The school's staff and students participated in the Panorama survey and the data from non-white employees was dismal. The equity committee was a joke. They did read a book, so that can be crossed off the list. When I said equity is more than a committee and it is who you are, it went over the leadership members' heads. What more can you expect when a school only starts equity work because a Black man was killed by a police officer? Do you know how hard it is to keep your composure when you are at a DEI training and the white leader keeps talking over you to correct your lived experience? In Equity 101 you learn, "Don't do that!"

Do you know how hard it is to have white women yell at you, you report it, and little action is taken even though the white women admit to doing it and being wrong? Well, they did cry after being confronted about their inappropriate actions, so I guess that meant they were sorry. I was told not to worry since I was not in the wrong in any of the situations. That wasn't

the point. I was tired of being subjected to that type of verbal abuse. No one deserves verbal abuse even if you are an administrator. Despite how I knew these situations would turn out, I still spoke up. I am also a journalist, so I used another tool to ensure I had proof in case there was ever any doubt about my actions.

Do you know how hard it is to be coached by a principal who spends more time asking you about your expertise rather than helping you improve? I did learn something about myself. I learned that I am willing to get into good trouble even if that means I had to walk away from a job I loved. I enjoyed being an academic dean but even I could see the writing on the wall. I was no longer silent and compliant. Although I had good performance reviews the entire time I was there, it didn't matter because I refused to look the other way when the school was making poor choices. I even found myself in a situation where I called child protective services when no one else did. The school did later confirm with a lawyer that CPS should be called. I know I am a mandated reporter, and I was not about to have any students on my watch be in danger. I was not going to ignore my obligation when others did.

Even though people constantly reported me for speaking up, I decided not to stop. I never got into trouble for speaking up, but I had to constantly explain myself. However, the phone calls, text messages, and emails letting me know I was the reason some of my colleagues had any hope reminded me that the risk was worth it. One person said, "I was sad to read you are leaving but also excited for what God has in store for you. Thank you for being a voice to those who are unheard. I pray you have peace and joy doing what you love to do!"

I am going to make this clear. Good trouble means stepping out on faith that good will prevail even if there are minor setbacks or difficult situations. If you are an educator and you are not willing to get into good trouble, then what are you doing in education?