

FORUM

Make sure you're present in people's lives



Micha James
Guest Columnist

My grandmother passed away on the 25th of March, which was also Good Friday. I had the opportunity to spend

because we were still two of the few blacks in class; we continued to get in a little trouble; and he continued to take the fall.

He was an athlete; I worked and was active in other organizations, so we rarely hung out after school. We vowed to stay in touch while in college and we did - mostly during our holiday breaks.

All of sudden, we were adults and having conversations about our post-college

mother that I realized he was the first major loss in my life. But it was also then where I realized how important it was for me to be present in our friendship. I wouldn't have had the opportunity to experience a relationship where we got on each other's nerves but in turn, assured we each were on track to produce the greatness our parents expected. I had to be present in order to understand how rare it was for a young

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every night with her in hospice the week prior to her death. It was an experience I pray to NEVER forget.

The conversation, the jokes, the pain, the peace, the staff, her final wishes and her admiration of me have changed me forever. It has caused me to verify if I am robotically moving through life or if I am actually present.

Recently, I was stopped by a friend's mother who wanted to invite me to a Happy Hour in memory of him. It immediately brought back all the emotions I felt with the loss of my grandmother less than 30 days prior, but I held it together because my loss surely could not be greater than a parent losing their child. I spent all evening reflecting on my relationship with my friend and why I missed him so much.

Derek and I met at Northwest Middle School in 1992 during Open House in what would be our homeroom class. It was difficult not to notice him because we were two of three black students in the class and he was the only male. I was usually taller than most of my classmates, and he reminded me of it at least three times a week.

He would call me "Sasquatch," especially when he would have to take the fall for something all three of us did. He tortured me, but it wasn't the bully type of torture; it was as if we were siblings. We had classes together all throughout middle school, and if he didn't make enough fun of me in class, he would continue his shenanigans on the bus; yes we rode the same bus, too.

When it came time for high school, I opted for a school outside of my district, which happened to also be the same school where Derek was enrolled, and we ended up in some of the same classes again. By then, he was taller than me but I was of age to wear heels and would remind him from time to time who was boss as I looked down at him.

We continued to sit near each other

plans. It was weird; we were no longer joking but attentively listening to each other and actually caring about what was said.

I didn't know what to do with the information about him being sick. What kind of sick? Was it his allergies that always flared with small bumps on his face every year around his birthday? The only thing that could cause him to not return to school was the flu. I mean, we were in our early 20s, how sick could he be? Then I learned he was diagnosed with a dreadful form of cancer. OK ... I was in nursing school, so I'm sure there's a chemotherapy that could treat it. What do you mean, he can't walk? It all became overwhelming and I needed to talk to him so I could learn all that was happening.

I visited him at home, where his infectious smile was plastered on his face. Somehow he found a way to crack a joke and this time, I willingly acted as the butt of the joke. Nursing school trained me to recognize signs and symptoms of illnesses but it never prepared me for how to deal with illnesses when they affected my friends and family.

Derek left us in 2004, not long after I gave birth. It wasn't until speaking with his

black man to be a great athlete and an honor student, yet still remain humble and kind.

My son is now in the sixth grade, and I had to be present to understand why I smile when he works in his "Wordly Wise Vocabulary Book." Derek and I would compete to see who could finish the fastest. He usually won!

I had to be present to know why I give my son specific guidance about how to carry himself. I watched Derek as he always wore his pants on his waist; his polo shirts pressed and buttoned; he smelled fresh; and his face was perfectly moisturized.

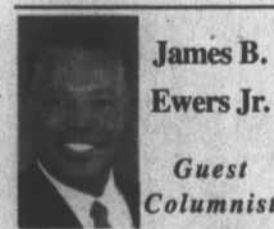
I miss my grandmother and I miss Derek but I'm incredibly grateful I was present because my presence is what creates happy tears.

Take inventory on your life and make sure you're present because memories of your presence will surely offer comfort during some of the most uncomfortable periods in your life.

Micha James is a writer in Winston-Salem.



Happy Father's Day to my dad and to men everywhere



James B. Ewers Jr.
Guest Columnist

I have not been able to say Happy Father's Day to my dad because he passed away and went to heaven over 30 years ago. So I dedicate this column to him and to all men who lovingly have this role.

My dad, whose name I bear, was born in Jamaica, a tiny island in the West Indies. As I reflect on growing up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, which I will say more about later, my dad was definitely my parent. He was my parent and not my friend. I am sure that many men my age can say the same thing about their fathers. I always thought that he was larger than life as I loved him and feared him both at the same time. When I got out of hand, my mom would always say, "Jimmy, I am going to let your father know when he gets home." Of course this is after she gave me one of her patented spankings. Well, when my dad came home, he would admonish me verbally. While my father was a dentist, I believe he also had a degree in psychology as he made me feel so bad about

my inappropriate behavior.

My dad ended up in Winston-Salem because a Jamaican dentist colleague told him about the city. My dad's friend lived in High Point, a short drive from Winston-Salem. High Point is arguably the furniture capital of America. When they got together, Jamaica was the central topic of conversation. He always seemed happy when he talked about his homeland. Even after I was born, my dad was the only Jamaican in the city. That is almost unbelievable but that is the way it was. Later, he sponsored his nephew, also from Jamaica, so Wilfred became the second Jamaican in the city. There were many men besides my cousin Wilfred who came around the house seeking fatherly advice or help in some way. As I grew older, I began to hear stories about how he had assisted some of these men. I am not sure that I ever had a real Southern accent, although my mom was American. I will say that you had to



Photo provided by James B. Ewers Jr.
James B. Ewers Sr.

For example, the word "three" was pronounced "tree."

He was a serious man who gave me many life lessons. He always told me that America was a land of opportunity. I didn't fully understand what he meant until our family went to Jamaica during my early teens. There are tourist spots like Ocho Rios and Montego Bay and there are smaller less popular places like Mandeville and Spanish Town. After sleeping on beds made of straw and going outside and picking mangos and grapefruits for breakfast, I understood more clearly what he meant. He also taught me how to save money. He was a money manager long before Charles Schwab. Being a dentist in a private practice made him watch every dime. Sometimes I have to laugh at myself because I, too, watch every dime. His basic philosophy was always live below your means and save for a rainy day. After my mom passed away, it was just my dad and me. During the

and dip French bread in it. I am not sure where he got that combination but it was sure good. And during the summers, we would sit on the stoop or on the side porch. He was never too busy for me. My dad earned the respect of people. I can't imagine the challenges that he faced being from another country. I believe before he passed away that we became friends. He continued to give me advice. The difference was that he also asked my opinion on matters. I never had to look for a role model or for a hero because my dad was both. He was the most caring and generous man that I have ever known in my entire life.

There are many men who have similar stories about their dads. This is just one. So for all young dads out there, my advice is that you spend quality time with your child or children. Have them grow up loving you and when you are gone missing you. I miss my dad.

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“I have not been able to say Happy Father's Day to my dad because he passed away and went to heaven over 30 years ago.”

have a keen ear to understand my dad. Sometimes I

was an interpreter when friends were at my house.

There were also some words said a bit differently.

winter time, we would have cocoa made with milk