Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor Friday, 28 September 2012 09:54



I confess. I am now, and probably always will be, a member of the 47% about whom Presidential Candidate Romney has voiced his disrespect and disdain. I am African-American. I was a single mom after my divorce. I was a college student who received a government subsidized student loan.

When I was a child, my divorced mom received benefits from Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). I am a working woman. And yes, I voted for President Barack Obama four years ago, and damn proud of it. I am in the ranks of the 47%.

Having said that let me clarify for Romney and his camp a few misconceptions about the 47%—in my life experience, most of the people I knew who received government subsidies didn't want them. A few lacked the skills and/or education to get jobs at a livable wage. Others had childcare responsibilities at a time when it was not socially acceptable for women to leave their children in the care of others, and Head Start did not exist. Also, it was believed that a

WANTED: A caring and compassionate presidential candidate for the 47%

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woman's place was in the home, and while Black women had always worked historically, many subscribed to the social views of women at that time.

As a child, I came to realize that receiving welfare was an embarrassing social fact. It subjected us to a form of class contempt reflected in the attitudes of the social workers who would sweep through our apartment to "inspect" our residence, and comment on the fact that we were "clean" and "well-kept." I remember hiding a plug-in telephone under the linen because it was against welfare policy for us to have that item. And yet, had something happened to us, and my mother had gone out to look for work or take whatever job she could find as a domestic, the same social workers would have accused her of neglect for leaving us alone without any way to contact her in an emergency.

To this day those images of social workers, who were primarily white with a majority Black clientele—though there was the occasional Black one who acted no different towards us—looking down their noses at us is burned into my brain and emotional psyche. My mission in life was never to ask anybody for anything ever again: not my father—rest his soul, not the government, not anyone.

And so, at the tender age of 14, I lied about my age and began working in the historically wealthy white community at the intersection of Michigan and Chicago Avenues in Chicago, IL. There is today a Walgreens on that corner above which are some of the first condominiums in Chicago. Though now gone, the 777 Grill was once housed there.

I began my working career in that place as a bus girl clearing dishes and making social observation that (wealthy) people who shopped down the street at Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus (which we called Needless Markup) were some of the cheapest tippers and could be the nastiest customers. They intentionally made a mess so "the help" could clean up after them—sound familiar?

THE WORKING POOR

Within a few weeks of working, I had proven my mettle and was promoted to a waitress and working the register. Back in 1967, I was the only Black face among the staff and the customers. Black folks (rich or poor) rarely ventured into the north side of Chicago. Even the late Martin Luther King observed the entrenchment of residential segregation in Chicago when he visited there in 1968 prior to his assassination.

The patterns of disparity that characterized Chicago over fifty years ago are still prevalent in the city today. The recent teachers' strike in Chicago made clear that those most affected by the outcome of the negotiations, whatever they are, will be primarily African-American children who live well below the poverty level—junior members of the 47%.

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