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Full Lip Press

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FULL LIP PRESS

by Marvita Oliver
Student

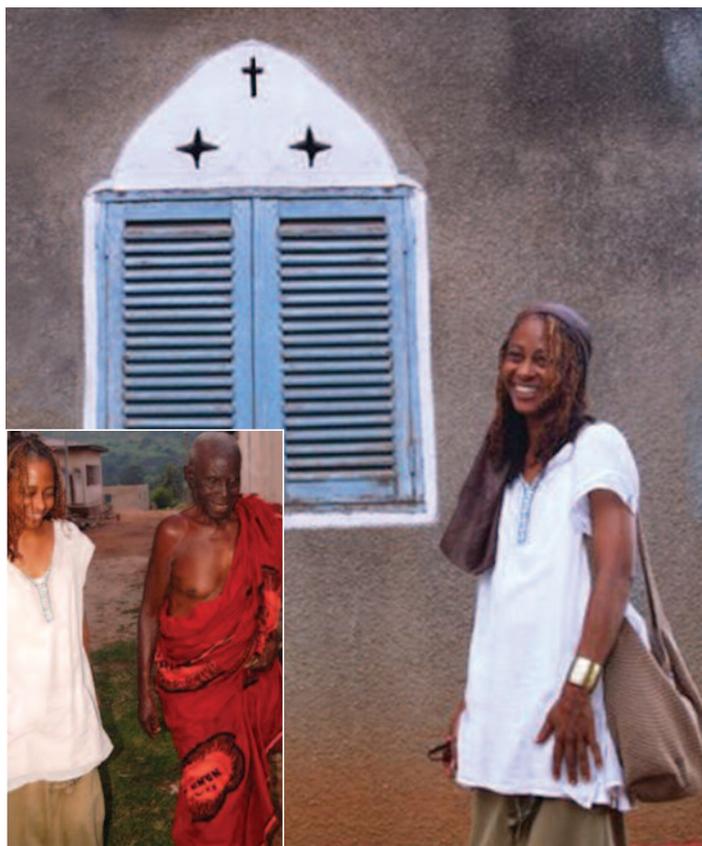


I lived in Ghana, West Africa, for almost 12 years of my life. My son and I returned to the states in the cold of December, 2008, to spend time with my family here. Once here, I decided to attend JCCC as a way to help me transition back into living in the states. Living in Ghana was an experience that will remain with me.

It was in Ghana that I finally learned to be myself. When I look back, I realize that my journey to Ghana began as a child moving from Georgia to Kansas.

When we arrived in Kansas, it was cold. My father had moved into an apartment, and my mother had driven us here in her VW. My brothers and I were thrilled. We started school right away. In Georgia, our private school teachers had been white nuns. Now I was going to public school as a fourth grader and, oh yeah, I was going to be the only black person in the whole building. There were a few other black students in my brothers' school.

The first few weeks I must have had a very strong southern accent because whenever I said my first name, Marvita, teachers called me Marquita, Marguerite, Margret, Mayeta,...



even Rafuta. Name butchery was something I could not have expected, as a fourth grader. This led to my first compromise. I asked my teachers and new friends to call me Karen, my middle name. Besides, Karen sounded "whiter" than Marvita did. That name change worked, until my friends learned that "Marvita" was a blend of my father's name, Marvin, and my mother's name, Annita. So, my close friends called me, Marvin, to my parent's initial chagrin.

In Georgia, we rode the bus to school, not because we were "bussed," but because we attended private school. In Kansas, we lived just close enough not to be on the bus route and just far enough that it was a bit of a walk. One day walking home alone from school, I was just about at our apartment when I got the surprise of my life. A kid yelled out from the passing bus a name that I had never heard said to me. I understood what the word meant, and it felt as if a bolt had shot through my soul. I looked to see if anyone had seen or heard what he said. It looked as though no one had, – except for the children on that bus. All I could think was, "I thought they said that people weren't prejudice in Kansas."

In time I learned that yes, prejudice could be found in Kansas, in subtle ways especially. My friends called me a good dancer, but I wasn't good enough for the school's drill team. I was written up by a choir teacher for disrupting my class because some of the class were freaking out over my afro. I won the field day sporting track event but wasn't allowed, as promised, to compete in the inter-district meet. This was small stuff in comparison to what others have gone through, as I would learn. Growing up in Kansas, overall, has been a great experience that I have no regrets about. But the pressure of assimilation as a child was very strong for me, as the only black, or one of a few, from elementary to high school. A few snubs left a zing to my young spirit, but for the most part, I was able to get over and "forget about it," as they say.

Actually, they were nothing compared to what I learned from one of my father's books, *House of Bondage*, a huge book with pictures of South Africa during apartheid. I learned the photographer had to sneak the pictures and was exiled from his country. Blacks were under apartheid. The meaning of the word is just as it sound – apart hate. The pictures in the volume were both beautiful and awful, showing what it was like to be black in South Africa. From what I saw, it was terrible. Yet the people were able to look wonderful from the soul, like Frederick Douglas says. That

intro to Africa and its people was very abstract for me. I knew it was real, but reality for me was Overland Park. Here, I was free to live among white people or any other. The biggest pressure that I had I put on myself. I wanted to be so like my friends and peers.

When I was growing up, almost every face I saw was white, with skinny noses and thin lips, unlike what they saw when they looked at me with my broader nose and not so skinny lips. My behind didn't fit into the jeans they sold in the neighborhood, without protruding. J-Lo and Angelina hadn't hit the scene yet, and a big behind and thick lips were yet embarrassing for me.

My hair was spongy, black and curly, and often a mystery to style. My white girlfriends had mostly straight hair that they washed every morning in the shower. - What??? I began to blow dry and hot curl to press and smooth out my hair. As a result, my hair never grew past my shoulders. When I stopped pressing my hair and started wearing a natural, twisted style instead, my hair grew to the middle of my back. I also developed a habit of pressing my lips in, so they didn't look so thick. Over the years, my facial muscles were stressed and tense. I also was constantly squeezing my behind in, so it didn't stick out so much. By the time I left high school, I was tired, yet still contorting, pressing, squeezing and assimilating.

In time, I attended an historically black college and experienced culture shock once again when I began to live and interact with black people. I was learning what it was to be black. Some of my new black friends told me that I acted white. Well, I guess all that pressing, squeezing and contorting worked after all. But I didn't want to hear that, not from black people. I learned more about Africa. The opportunity came for me to go to Ghana, West Africa; the idea of a nation of Black people made me want to meet my family, though I knew no one there.

When I arrived in the airport at Accra, Ghana, the heat hit me in the face and gave me a full – body wrap. As I mingled with the Ghanaians, I recognized the faces of some of the people. They looked like so many people that I had seen in the states. It was as if I had found families, not yet my own, but the relatives of so many people that I had known. It was when I saw the resemblances of the faces in Ghana with those in America that I understood that we were all members of one tribe or another. In Ghana, there are the Fantes, the Ga, the Ewes, and of course the Ashanti, and many more tribes. These people, though they were unique, clearly resembled each other. In time, I began to recognize and name the tribes myself.

The relaxed atmosphere also hit me in the face. There's something about being relaxed that makes a person simply

beautiful. It became a habit for me to rise before dawn, awakened by the rooster's crow and the birds orchestrating the sun's appearance and putting the day into place with all their instructions and calls to each other. No alarm clock was needed. The natural sounds outside of my window let me know what time it was, and in time, my own internal clock adjusted to the routine. It was best to get an early start in the day, to beat the heat that would come by 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning. By noon, folks are ready to take a break from the heat, come together, and eat, sit, relax, or sleep. People took their time. At first, it seemed very foreign and often frustrating. But in time, I learned also to take my time. Patience is a virtue.

There's also something about watching an orange-red sun burst drip, drop, dip and spray a purple haze into the sky's horizon day after day that affirms your own place on earth.

When I came to Ghana, I saw people whose color ranged from blue black to albino, with all shades, mostly brown, in between. No one pulled in their lips or tried to hide their behinds, as far as I could tell. Indeed, many of the lips that I saw were big, thick and beautiful. The women had more curves than I could count. Teeth were amazingly straight and white. Most of all people, male and female, were comfortable in their own skin.

I laughed at myself in Ghana. I couldn't push my lips out far enough and had to ask myself where my behind was, not to mention all the other curves. It was all very liberating. I relaxed my face, my body, and my mind. I accepted who I was and rejoiced in the expression of me and felt at ease with being myself. I saw me when I looked at the people in front of me.

After all the years of trying to be like someone else, I was now able to see that I didn't have to assimilate to another culture because I belonged to a culture of people who were happy with who they were, and who were happy with me as I was. I wasn't "different" there.

Now, I am back living where I grew up as a child, and I am enjoying the experience. I am comfortable with who I am, and as a result, I am able to give more of myself to those around me. Overland Park has changed some over the years, and I am enthusiastic about realizing the changes that have taken place and participating in the community.

Ghana is across the Atlantic. Did I have to travel half way around the world to find out who I was and to give up on my full lip press? No, but that's how it happened for me, at that time in my life. There were many things that I experienced in Ghana that helped me to slow down and to be happy with who I am, no matter where I am, and that is something that I will always cherish about my time living in Ghana, West Africa. Akwaaba.