

Canaan Kennedy
Struggles to Victory Over Racism in America

Growing up my father would tell me and my siblings stories of his experiences with racism, being a black kid in New York and London. He had all white peers and classmates and he frequently got into fights and was beaten up. I can remember sitting at the dinner table while he discussed his experiences with racism. When he was living in London as a child he was the only black kid, and he was ostracized because he looked different than the other kids. He recalls being chased and beaten up by two white brothers everyday after school. His mother would wait for him at the door with a broomstick to deter the brothers.

While my father and grandmother were living in Manhattan, New York City, my father attended Manhattan Country school during junior high and then attended Riverdale, a prestigious high school in the Bronx, New York. Most of the students at Riverdale were white and came from rich or upper-class families. My father got along with most of the kids at his high school but they definitely didn't understand the black experience or the middle class black American. Most of the students at Riverdale lived in the affluent areas of the Upper East and West Side of Manhattan. They were picked up everyday by private school buses and driven to Riverdale through Harlem and Spanish Harlem, (on the upper West and East sides of Manhattan) which at that time the residents were poor blacks and Hispanics. The brownstones and tenements of the area were battered and abandoned. With little interaction with people of color this must have had a profound effect on the minds of the mostly white students at Riverdale.

While in high school my father became a star athlete playing football and running track. My father was extremely fast but he had weak knees, so at track meets he would literally hobble down to the blocks and slowly get into his stance and then he would bolt off - winning nearly every race. He ran the 100 and 220 yard dash and the long jump. He was a track star at Riverdale but he never had a real coach to teach him how to run properly and to learn the different techniques to get a faster time.

In his junior year he decided to forego playing football and focus solely on track. This displeased the football coach because he was one of their top players. With his mind on track he practiced hard and won every meet he ran. On a road meet against a rival school, he won the 100 yard dash running the fastest time in Riverdale history. After the meet was over they went back to the school and informed the athletic director of the new record. The athletic director told my father that his time was not valid because it was during a road meet and they were not going to recognize his time. The athletic director told my father that all the records were home records. When pressed about the reasoning for not getting the record my father has told me that resentment and race were certainly factors. Many of the sprint records were twenty years old and were held by a school icon who was white. My father had worked hard for three years to break those records, and when he finally achieved the ultimate goal, there was no recognition of it because he was black.

After graduating from Riverdale he enrolled at Antioch College. At Antioch he received a double major in Journalism and International Studies. Soon after graduating he started looking for a job. After searching around he finally landed one at Time Warner Books in New York City. On his application it said that he was born in Rome, Italy, and the president of the division my father worked in at the time was Italian. He was qualified for the position but the major reason he got the job over others was because he was presumed to be Italian. After a couple weeks working

there the president asked, how the new Italian hire was doing. They pointed to my father and the president said, "He's not Italian, he's black." Luckily for my father they didn't fire him because he had proved that he was capable of doing the job. In this instance racial/ethnic bias worked out in his favor. This happens in the workplace often; someone is hired solely because of their gender or ethnicity, which is wrong, but it clearly happens. It is unfair to the person who doesn't get the job, but I don't think there's a way for racial or gender discrimination to end because it is so difficult to prove.

Anyways, while advancing at Time Warner my father worked on special projects for the president, bringing in new ideas and increasing profitability. An important job opened up as the assistant to the vice president of one of the major book divisions. The president thought that my father could bring new energy to a division that was struggling. The vice president was a man who was openly racist and deeply resented the president assigning my father to him. The vice president looked for ways to fire my father despite the division's improvement. The vice president asked him to work on a special project that required my father to work overtime. At the time overtime pay was frozen and any overtime work had to be authorized by the vice president or president. Unauthorized overtime was a fireable offense. The vice president told my father that he had authorized his overtime and when my father turned in his time sheet showing over forty hours of overtime the vice president had the ammunition to fire my father. Racism had cost him an opportunity to continue working for Time Warner.

My father has dealt with his fair share of racist circumstances throughout his years. The worst experience he endured was when he was beaten up by a police officer outside of his father's home in the predominantly white neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia. He was driving to my grandfather's house late at night with one of his friends who was black. The officer had followed them in his patrol car with his lights off for several miles. My grandfather's house sits at the end of steep dead end street that leads into a park. There are no lamp posts lining the street so at night it is very dark. Half way down the steep hill the officer turned on his front lights and overhead lights. My father was startled by the sudden lights and continued down the hill pulling into his father's driveway. The officer got out of his car yelling at my father, proceeding to hit my father with his flashlight, knocking him to the ground. He kicked and punched him in the face and body knocking him almost unconscious. My father was yelling and screaming, "What have I done?!", as the officer dragged him across the driveway to his patrol car. Other police officers arrived on the scene as my grandfather, step-grandmother and uncle came out of the house horrified to see what was happening to my father. The officers on the scene drew their guns pointing them at my family, shouting at them to "Get back!" "What are his charges?!" they yelled. "What has he done?!" They threw my father and his friend into the back of a police wagon and took them to the precinct where they were handcuffed to a bench. They were released on bail a couple hours later.

The arresting officer charged my father with assault and if convicted he would go to jail. My father was a graduate of Antioch College, he had spend a semester at Princeton and had never been charged with a crime in his life. The Kennedy family's first step was to get a lawyer. They went to the NAACP for a recommendation. They spoke to a black lawyer and she suggested for him to plead guilty. She asked my father if he had ever been in trouble and if they were on drugs he replied "No." She whispered to him "It's okay, I know your parents are here but you can tell me the truth." He was outraged; she didn't believe his story. He walked out of that office that day thinking he was going to jail.

Still in search of a capable lawyer, my grandmother, Adrienne Kennedy called up a friend who suggested Roger Adelman, a renowned lawyer and former U.S District Attorney. The family hired Mr. Adelman to represent my father and he was confident that the Arlington County District Attorney's office didn't have a case. There was no evidence that my father assaulted the officer. He coached my father in what to say and how to say it so that the DA couldn't make a case against him. The judge at the trial, after hearing three police officers testify had heard enough and acquitted my father of all charges.

Throughout the whole ordeal my father had been writing down his thoughts and recollections of what happened. My grandmother, Adrienne Kennedy had also been writing down her thoughts. Together they combined what they had and in a couple of months they had written a full-length play, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*. They sent it to James Houghton, a producer and theatrical pioneer who, with an ingenious idea of single-playwright seasons, did the impossible: he created a theatrical empire with Signature Theatre. James Houghton loved the play and Michael Kahn, one of the foremost stage directors of our time directed it. He has taught at Juilliard and directed plays for the Shakespeare Theatre Company. It is said that he has this power which he translates into images that makes performances magical. Nobody understand actors better than Michael Kahn. *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* was performed in New York at the Public Theater, and it received good reviews in the New York Times and was soon named Best New American Play by the Village Voice OBIE's, Off Broadway Theatre Awards.

Here is an excerpt from my interview with my father, Adam P. Kennedy, concerning his incident with the police. Conducted on August 20th, 2014 at Canaan Kennedy's home in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Canaan: How did *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* come about?

Adam P. Kennedy: *Sleep Deprivation* came about from when I was stopped by the police and beaten up by this police officer. That's how it came about.

Canaan: Can you go into detail about that?

Adam P. Kennedy: Okay, 1991. I was staying with Grandpapa and Claire's. They're in Arlington, VA. Duane Grier, one of my good friends from college, came over and we went out; it was a Saturday night if I remember correctly and Duane and I hung out pretty regularly on the weekends and we went out to a bar, several bars that we usually went to. Then, we were heading back, we were driving Grandpapa's car. It was a green Ford Granada. We were in the district, in DC, and on occasion, Duane would stay the night. So on this occasion, he came back with me, it was probably about 2 o'clock in the morning and we stopped at an all night diner called Bob and Edith's, I've shown it to you. It's right across the street from William Jefferies where we now go to have oysters.

We stopped there and we had breakfast and then we drove back to the house. That's only a couple of minutes. As you know, on Grandpapa's and Claire's street, it's very dark. So by the time I was half way - more than halfway down the hill, I was surprised, stunned, that all of a sudden there were these police lights. Red and blue lights flashing. I had no idea where they

were coming from. He was right behind us. I pulled into Grandpapa's driveway and he pulled in behind us and I got out of the car. I actually started walking into the house, not really necessarily realizing he was dealing with us because I couldn't figure out why the lights were on. I started walking to the house, as did Duane, and the officer said, "Get back in the car." And I stopped and I said, "Officer, I live here."

I said, "What seems to be the problem?" Again, he said to me, "Get back in the car." And I said to him, I repeated, "Officer, I live here, what seems to be the problem?" Maybe that happened one more time. So finally, he said, "Get back in the car." So I made my way back to the car. And still asking, "What seems to be the problem?" This was in January, so it was cold. I went to get back in the car, I opened the car door and he said, "Come back here." I'm a little nervous because he was agitated. Duane was still by the passenger side door. I was wearing a heavy jacket and again, I sensed he was a little bit agitated. He had the flashlight in his hand. He was shining it in my face. I had several other experiences with the police that made me very fearful of the police.. So I listened to what he said and I walked back to him and we got pretty close to each other when all of a sudden I was hit in the side of the head. He hit me in the head with his flashlight and knocked me to the ground.

He then proceeded to kick and punch me and then drag me. At that point we were near the end of the car. He dragged me across the driveway and threw me to the ground. In retrospect, at that time, Grandpapa and Claire had a row of large rocks lining the driveway. I didn't know it then, but when he threw me to the ground, my head just missed one of these big rocks. He threw me to the ground, he's kicking me, he's beating me. Duane is yelling and I'm sort of out of it. I wasn't unconscious but I was pretty well dazed. The next thing I remember is a number of other police cars, two, three, four other police cars were there with other officers coming out. At this point Dad and Claire and Uncle Joe, who was at the house, came out of the house. Grandpa and Claire were in their pajamas. And the officers - I'll never forget that - several of the officers withdrew their guns and they were pointing their guns at Grandpapa and Claire and Joe very menacingly.

I'm trying to remember the sequence of events. A couple of officers picked me up and they slammed me spread eagle on the front of the squad car and one of them was holding me down pretty hard. I was screaming. I said, "I'm an American citizen, what have I done?" Then, Duane was saying to one of the officers, this black officer, "What are you doing?" She said, "Shut up, keep your mouth quiet. Keep quiet. If you say anything else I'm going to arrest you." He said, "I can ask a question." And then she went over, she grabbed him and she put the handcuffs on him. Then, Dad is yelling, "What's going on? What has he done?" I don't know, there were six, seven, eight officers on the scene. Lights flashing. Again, their guns were drawn - several of them had their guns drawn. I kept asking, "What have I been arrested for? What have I done?" No one answered me.

A few minutes later they threw Duane and me into the back of a paddy wagon. I could hear Dad yelling, "What has he done?" And no one would answer him. Uncle Joe had a video camera and he had been videotaping some of this when he came out. I'm sure he'll show it to you if you want to see it. It doesn't have a lot, it's kind of frantic. Then we got taken to the precinct. I was badly beaten up. They handcuffed us, they took us inside; they handcuffed us to a bench and one of the

police doctors or a paramedic was examining me and he said "He's been pretty well beaten up." We just were there sitting on the bench, handcuffed.

I don't know how much time elapsed, a hour, two hours, when Grandpapa and Claire and Joe arrived. They had been trying to get us released and I think there was like a thousand dollar bond on each one of us. And since it was a Saturday night, Grandpapa didn't have an ATM card. It just happened to be that mum, Mrs. Hunken, Claire's mother, had \$2,000 in cash at the house. We were released on bail and I was charged with assaulting a police officer and Duane was charged with resisting arrest. After Grandpa and Claire picked us up, they took me to the hospital where I was examined. All the doctors said, "He's been pretty well beaten up." My face was messed up, my mouth, luckily nothing broken, but I had been kicked in the chest and punched all over my body and that was that part of it.

Canaan: Okay. How did you prepare for the trial, who was your lawyer?

Adam P. Kennedy: The next day, Grandmama came from New York and I guess they consulted on what to do and a lawyer was recommended from the NAACP. Your grandparents, Duane and myself met with the lawyer. She was a black woman. She said, "Okay, tell me what happened." We told her what happened. She said, "You've been charged with assaulting an officer, this is a very serious crime." She suggested right off the bat that we plead guilty and get a reduced charge. Both Duane and I said, "No. There's no way we're doing that." Everyone agreed. I said, "I've never been in trouble." Then, I'll never forget, she looked at me and she stared at me and smirked. And she said, "You can tell me the truth, I know your parents are here but you can tell me the truth." I was totally offended. She just assumed that we had been in trouble before. I knew right then and there that she wasn't the right person. She didn't believe us.

She painted a pretty bleak picture and I left that office feeling that I was going to go to jail. Lorton Prison is only about twenty minutes, a half hour from Arlington; I passed it a zillion times coming down to Williamsburg. I was scared.

Then, Adrienne (Grandmama) contacted a friend who recommended a lawyer in the district. His firm was Kirkpatrick and Lockhart. That's where we met the person who ended up taking on my case, his name is Roger M. Adelman.

Canaan: How did you prepare for the trial? What advice did he give you?

Adam P. Kennedy: Roger Adelman. He was a very highly regarded lawyer. He was a former US district attorney. He had prosecuted John Hinckley, the man who shot President Reagan. He's done many other things. He was a very noted trial attorney.

There were a variety of things going on at the time.

I was doing our TV show, *Africa/USA: The Connection*, and *The World Connection* and at some point, the whole Rodney King incident - I'm sure you're familiar with - happened as well. I had gotten a nice article in the Washington Post about the TV show and there was a debate on whether we should take this to the press or not. Roger, to his credit, said "No, let's not do that."

Grandmama got quite a few people to write letters on my behalf. I think in some ways, it made the Arlington County's District Attorney's office very angry. In their minds we were a typical uneducated poor black family. When they started getting letters from the governor's office, former governors, prominent individuals, they realized that they had messed with the wrong black family. But instead of being cooperative, it made them angrier and they dug in their heels more.

The first time Roger and myself met with the Arlington district attorney, it was pretty evident right from the bat that this wasn't much of a case. He just assumed that she was going to drop it but she didn't. She said, "This is going to trial." Roger was very surprised because there was no evidence that I had struck this officer.

Anyway, the main thing Roger emphasized was just being calm, telling the truth and making sure your story is always the same. He tried to get it thrown out but they wouldn't do it. We went to trial and other people who are testifying can't be in the courtroom. So Grandmama didn't want to be there, I can't remember why. But Uncle Joe and Duane and Grandpapa and Claire weren't allowed to be in the courtroom because they were witnesses. The officer who beat me, his name was Officer Castro. He was a light skinned Latino.

Canaan: There was a police training book on how officers should deal with different races?

Adam P. Kennedy: That's later on. That was when the civil case adjudicated. We found out, the second officer on the scene was a black woman. She was the first person to draw her gun. She got on the stand first and said, "The accused were erratic and behaving angrily", and they "had no choice but to draw their guns", and so on and so forth.

Roger was able to dismiss her pretty quickly. Another officer got on the stand. He had gotten there late and he didn't have much to say so he couldn't corroborate Officer Castro's testimony. Officer Castro finally got on the stand and we learned that officer Castro had followed us from Bob and Edith's. My car had a broken tail light which we didn't know about until during the trial.

As Roger grilled the officer, he made it clear that Castro could have stopped us anytime on Columbia Pike, the whole mile and a half before we go up the hill to inform us that we had a broken tail light. He said he didn't do that because he wanted to see what else we were going to do. Roger just pounced on that. He said, "What do you mean what else they're going to do?" He said, "They had a broken tail light, why didn't you stop them for a broken tail light?" He was following us. He claimed he didn't know we were black. At that time, Arlington was predominantly white. He followed us with his lights off for a mile and a half. He claimed that once we got down to the bottom of the hill he was frightful because I hadn't stopped and we were heading toward the house. As I said, it's something I've done a zillion times, got out of the car, walked to the house. Anyway, he then proceeded to say what happened. He admitted he hit me in the head with the flashlight. The reason he hit me in the head was because I apparently brushed him, I brushed his lapel. First he said I hit him and then again Roger pressed him. Roger said, "Did Mr. Kennedy hit you with his fist?" He said, "No." Roger asked, "Was his hand opened?"

He said, "Yes." Roger said, "Was it forceful enough to knock you back?" "No." He replied. Roger asked him "Mr. Kennedy didn't touch you at all did he?" I remember vividly Officer Castro lost his temper and he said "He touched me. I don't like to be touched."

Roger went into this whole thing, "As a police officer you're trained to contain violence and have appropriate response. Beating Mr. Kennedy to a pulp does not seem like an appropriate response." The officer was angry and irritated, his story was crumbling. After Roger finished cross examining him, the judge, to her credit, said, "I've heard enough and based on the evidence I've heard, this does not constitute assaulting a police officer. The case is dismissed." I was in shock. Happily so. I looked at Roger and he said, "That's it, it's over. We won." I came running out of the courtroom with my hands held high. I said, "We've won!" It was fantastic.

Everything the officers had said had been a lie. That was the end of the criminal case and then Roger suggested that there was a civil case here. So, Roger and - I can't remember the other lawyer's name now - we decided to sue Arlington County for damages, for pain and suffering. This went on for months; it was a very arduous situation.

In the civil case, we were allowed to go to the courthouse and the police department and go through their files. Tom Foltz, he was the other lawyer, very good. Tom stumbled upon the training manual for Arlington county police. It was as racist as you could get. It talked about how police officers should interact with different races of people. To paraphrase, "You deal with white people in a more respectful way. They tend to be calmer and more law obedient. Black people are more rambunctious and rowdy and disrespectful of the law so you have to be more forceful with them." It was horrible. We found something that was very important and that really was a testament to how the Arlington county police were trained. Arlington county is pretty liberal when you consider all the other counties around it. So, that was very disturbing.

I forgot to mention in the trial, when Roger asked officer Castro where he was currently employed, he said "The US Secret Service." He had quit his job as an Arlington county police officer, probably forced out, but he got another job with the secret service which says whatever it says. Later on we learned that he was forced to quit because he had a previous experience working for the Arlington Police force where he had harassed or beaten up a black woman so it was time for him to go.

Canaan: How did you come up with *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*?

Adam P. Kennedy: I decided I wanted to capture that evening, that period. At the time we were doing television and I thought this might make an interesting story, after Rodney King, and I had so many interactions with black men who had had very bad experiences with the police. I had already had several other encounters that were nearly as bad. I decided to write down what happened. I gave those pages to Grandmama (Adam's mother, Adrienne Kennedy) and she had been working on her thoughts about what had happened to me and to the family. It's to her credit, she put them together and we liked what we had. She decided to see if she could get someone to get interested in it. It was her impulse. The play, you've never seen it, it's sort of part realistic

courtroom drama which is what I wrote, then there's this surreal world that she wrote that deals with the anxiety and the anger and the persecution of a family.

It was 1995 - 1996. Your grandmother was offered the Signature Theatre Season. Jim Houghton was doing something very unique which was presenting a whole year of a playwright's work. He liked *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* and wanted to include it in her season. He chose Michael Kahn who is a fantastic director. He had done your grandmother's first play *Funnyhouse of A Negro*.

He came from Washington D.C to direct it and he did a fantastic job. Then subsequently, it got a very good review in the New York Times; it was wonderful. It got good reviews in a number of other papers and subsequently it was nominated for Best New American Play by the Village Voice Obie's Association and it won Best New American Play. That was quite an honor to receive the award. I've always wanted to work with my mother, so that was very special. And the two of us on stage together, it was wonderful.

Canaan: Can you explain that night that you accepted the award?

Adam P. Kennedy: I think it was a little bit surreal. Again, you go from being beaten up and like I said, if the officer had - when he dragged me across the driveway, as he was kicking me and punching me - when he threw me to the ground, if my head had landed another four or five inches to the left he might have cracked my skull and I would have been dead. To turn that horrible event, to have the police pointing their guns at Grandpapa and Claire, and Joe and all the things they put us through ... I truly believe that if we had been a white family in the same upper middle class position, they would have dropped the charges. I do believe that once they found out that we were prominent, I think they were going to show us, "You don't come into our house and tell us what to do. We're sending you to jail." I think that's become more obvious over the years. That the letters and the phone calls, not just from average people, but from lawyers and professors and the governor's office, the senator's office would have persuaded them to drop the case. Most people would have said, let's look at the case, it's flimsy and we're going to dismiss it. But they dug their heels in. I'll never forget, when the judge dismissed the case, the head district attorney, he stormed out of the courtroom. He was furious; he was furious.

That night was a combination of - it was surreal. It was also an honor to be able to do something with my mother because I've always wanted to do that.

This is an example of overcoming a difficult situation and making the best of it. It pains me to think that my father, the nicest, most genuine person I know would have to go through something like this. It infuriates me that this can happen to black men all across America. There must be a way to stop this violence: how can we end the racism in our country? I don't pretend to have the answer, but it will come from within ourselves. We must treat people with respect whether they are white, black, yellow, brown, we are all equal - we are all human beings. On the night that my father was beaten, Officer Castro saw my father as a monster, someone who was up to no good because his skin color was darker than his own, and that is why he beat him. The color of our skin does not define who we are and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. I long for

the day when we no longer deal with racism in America, but I am afraid that day will never come.

Our family fought against the Virginia judicial system and ultimately won. Through this experience my father and grandmother wrote *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, a play about a man brutalized by the police who fights the case and wins. It's a story of surviving racial prejudice and discrimination. This play was performed Off-Broadway and won the Obie Award in 1996 for Best New American play. Here are some excerpts from *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*.

Act 1, Scene 3

Spotlight shines on Teddy. After dragging Teddy diagonally across this concrete drive Officer Holzer slams Teddy's face down in the ground. Teddy lands on the dirt and the wet leaves, his head just inches away from smashing into a cluster of large rocks. Officer Holzer pulls Teddy's right arm upward and kicks him several more times in his chest and then places the handcuffs on him. Another officer appears and helps Officer Holzer pull Teddy up.

David Alexander follows David Jr. out of the house and stands in the front yard. The officers place Teddy spread eagle, his upper body placed flat on the car, his face turned sideways, his legs spread wide open; he is on top of the front of a police car. Two more officers surround Teddy pinning him down on the hood of the car Teddy is dazed and can barely breathe.

Teddy: Why am I being arrested? What is the charge?

David Alexander: You can't arrest him without a charge! What's the charge? Will someone answer me? What's the charge?

Teddy: What have I done?

David Alexander: Who's in charge here? What's your name? I'm talking to you.

(Officer Holzer pays very little attention to David Alexander.)

David Alexander: What's your name? What's your name and what's the charge?

Officer Holzer: You will be told at the station.

David Alexander: At the station? I want to know now, don't you have to tell somebody why you are arresting him?

Officer Holzer: I told him.

Teddy: You never told me. Why am I being arrested?

David Alexander: Why is he being arrested?

Officer Holzer: If there's a problem you can talk to the night supervisor.

(Teddy is placed into the patty wagon.)

David Alexander: I will. David Junior, do you have a pen and paper? What's your name and badge number?

Officer Holzer: It's right here on my uniform can't you see it?

David Alexander: It's dark and you keep moving around. What is it? (He tries to read the officer's badge.) ... Holzer 892462... You have made a very big mistake, my friend. You have tangled with the wrong family. You're going to be very sorry.