

# Lee: ‘The look’ vs. ‘the sigh’

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## IN PRACTICE

Tasha Lee

You’ve heard of “the look,” right? The one that people of color sometimes receive when they enter a store, walk down the street or just exist? I did not even realize “the look” existed until I was an adult.

I grew up in Gary, where more than 95% of the people I encountered had melanin-rich skin. I grew up learning about the civil rights movement and racism. That’s just it, though; I learned about it. I had not experienced it.

Maybe I was naive, but I thought the civil rights movement eradicated racism. At 18, I noticed something felt not quite right when I ventured outside Gary. I noticed people looking at me as though I was less than. I had a big chip on my shoulder because I was a teenage mom, so I attributed “the look” to that. After all, my daughter Yanna was with me all the time.

But she was not with me when I went to class or walked around Purdue University’s campus and “the look” still happened. I literally thought I was losing my mind. I didn’t talk to anyone about it because I didn’t want anyone to think I was crazy. I was worried someone would take Yanna from me. It wasn’t until I took a class on African American studies and a professor taught about “the look” that I realized, “Wait a minute, I’m not crazy. This is a thing. It’s not just me. But why?”

Fast forward and 3-year-old Yanna came home from daycare telling me that a boy from preschool told her she could not be pretty because she was Black. He called her the “N word.” She then asked me what that meant. In that moment I was hurt, enraged and baffled. After composing myself, I realized that racist attitudes and thoughts are taught; people aren’t born with them. What could I do about that? My younger self did not have a clue. I had to stay focused on accomplishing my goal of becoming a lawyer.

My dad tells me often that as far back as he can remember, I talked about being a lawyer. I recall being in high school and seeing “Lake County Prosecutor — Bernie Carter” signs in stores that described how a shoplifter would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. I thought, “That’s it; I am going to be a prosecutor.” I had no idea what that entailed until he came and spoke in one of my high school classes.

Prosecutor Carter spoke about serving the community and what an honor it was. Former judge, attorney general and mayor of Gary Karen Freeman-Wilson also came to a class at West Side High School to speak to us. Neither of them had an idea of how much I looked up to them (and still don’t, actually). They look like me, and because of that, I knew it was possible. I needed that because neither of my parents had gone to college. I did not personally know anyone who had even gone to law school.

In January of 2005, I finally became a prosecutor. I went to Allen County as the operating while intoxicated grant prosecutor in misdemeanor court. I wish I could say I entered this profession being

the truest version of myself, but it took me years before I was comfortable being myself. I was worried about being seen as “less than.” Years of receiving “the look” programmed me to code-switch. It wasn’t just my speech that I altered; I did not think the full version of myself would be professional. I did not realize that there was space for the authentic version of myself as a prosecutor. My mind could not conceive that there was space for my braids or natural hair. I look back upon how much I agonized over the decision to wear my natural hair, and I feel sorry for that version of Tasha. It took courage to just be me.

On the path to being authentic, I learned that being me was more than enough. It allowed me to be able to engage in real conversations with my colleagues who did not look like me. We became friends who are doing life together. I talked about “the look” with my colleague-turned-close friend, Chief Counsel Tesa Helge. Guess what? When she is with me, she notices “the look” now, too. She often tells me of conversations she has with family and friends about the look and other race-related topics. I will never meet them, but my voice and feelings will be heard through her. I have learned about some different thought processes. The most important thing is that we both know it is safe to have hard conversations despite our melanin levels being at opposite ends of the spectrum. We are both better prosecutors and people because we have had those hard conversations.

I eventually moved to the felony division in Allen County, where there were a lot of domestic violence cases. I fell head over heels in love with them. I asked for domestic violence cases to make up the bulk of my caseload. The more I met with survivors of color, the more I noticed “the sigh” when they entered my office to see my melanin-rich face. It happened almost every time. It did not matter if the survivor came in to recant or tell me what actually happened — “the sigh” was the same. It took me a minute to recognize why it was happening. I had enough life experiences at that point to know that “the sigh” was real. I was not imagining it. I had never met these people before. I was encountering them in some of their lowest situations, but they still gave me “the sigh.” The relief was real. They knew that no matter how different our paths in life were, I would just get it. There were things they did not have to explain to me. I just understood.

After the death of George Floyd in 2020, being a melanin-rich prosecutor felt heavy to me. I was angry. I was sad. I felt helpless. I felt like life was not fair. I hated that I had to have “the talk” with my kids even though I work in the system. I knew my counterparts did not. I felt like the narratives during that time were diametrically opposed. It did not seem like there was a middle ground. There were so many cases that came from those protests. I knew there were people who needed to be prosecuted for their actions. While I did not agree with property damage or people getting hurt, I understood the frustration. I knew that I could not fathom prosecuting any of those cases. I did not know exactly how my feelings would be received, but I was open about my opinions and my stance. My candidness was respected, and I was never asked to prosecute any of those cases.

I am fortunate enough to be able to participate in training prosecutors in Indiana. Every time I teach, if there is a young prosecutor of color in the audience, they come up to me afterward. They, too, give me “the sigh.” They tell me they didn’t know there was someone who looked like them doing this work. I get it. Every time I go to conferences, I look around to see if I am the only one. When I present, my heart swells with gratitude because I am a part of showing younger prosecutors of color that there is space for us. Not only is there space for us, but we need to be here. The system needs us. Defendants need to see us here. Survivors/victims need to see us. We need to see us.

Today, as a deputy prosecutor in Allen County, the job has given me so much. Statistically speaking, I should not be in this position. I grew up a young, poor, melanin-rich girl who got pregnant at 16 and

became a mom at 17. I have been blessed beyond what I was able to imagine. Every time I get to meet with a survivor/victim, teach a class or do a jury trial, I am living my dream.

But even in 2023, after almost two decades as a prosecutor, I still get “the look.” Some people of color look at me weirdly because of my role. They think I should be on the other side. They tell me I could make more money as defense counsel. Often, though, I also get another kind of look. A look accompanied with pride by members of the community who are familiar with my work. They give me “the look” because they are proud that I am theirs. I am regularly asked why I am still a prosecutor given everything going on in the world.

I do it for “the look,” and absolutely for “the sigh.”•