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## Student Activism: Fighting the Privilege to 'Forget'

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# Student Activism:

## Fighting the Privilege to 'Forget'



**Melissa Charles**

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In June of 2014, I began my job as a community organizer. The work was hard. As an organizer, I was responsible for mobilizing community members to:

1. Identify and vote on a community problem
2. Research the problem in depth and find best-practice solutions
3. Build a 'power of people' through continuous engagement of a network of justice-workers
4. Publicly ask city officials to address community problems and implement identified best-practice solutions

It was important work and to this day is something I aim to bring into all areas of my life. Early on into my career as an organizer, I found myself working primarily with people who had children my age. Or people with children who had children my age. There was little to no engagement with young adults in the community despite it being a college area. I was just one month out of college myself so I quickly began to seek out opportunities to infiltrate the local college and search for students who might be interested in

participating with the rest of the community. It was ineffective.

That summer of 2014 also ended up being the resurgence of a new, public era of grief for the Black community. Eyes not completely dry from the murders of Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant and Jordan Davis, we quickly lost Mike Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford and Tamir Rice. As a new full-time employee working 50+ hours a week and not technically allowed to make my 'position' on issues public, I felt helpless. The night of Mike Brown's non-indictment, I found myself sitting idly by watching CNN feeling as though there was absolutely nothing I could do. Then I witnessed young adults begin to mobilize in some of the most powerful ways.

I was inspired to return to a setting where I could utilize the skills and knowledge I'd gained as a community organizer amongst young students — future leaders. One year later, I am now a student again pursuing a Masters in Higher Education with a concentration in diversity and social justice education. My ultimate

goal is to work in an administrative capacity to create institutional change within education and on college campuses. I also aim to encourage coalition building and activism amongst students.

I now understand why my attempt to engage college students in community work was ineffective. As a student—as a Black woman who is a student, I have both the privilege to 'forget,' and the burden of remembering all the while. When news of Sandra Bland's death reached me, I was on my way to a hiking trip with a friend. It was a few weeks before my graduate program was to begin and I was reveling in my final vacation. I distinctly remember being grateful that I would soon lose service and not have to be aware of any updates regarding the case. At the same time, the fact that Sandra Bland was a young Black woman who drove cross-country to begin a career in higher education was something I could not shake. In just a few weeks, I would pack up my own car and drive cross-country in pursuit of my own career goals.

This experience is college in a nutshell. On campus, I find myself plagued with classwork, internships, volunteering, retreats and group projects. On the rare occasions where a break presents itself, I immediately retreat to Netflix and a few close friends. There is simply no time for me to think about all of the Black people being murdered on a daily basis. If I allow myself to stop for even one minute to contemplate the terror being inflicted upon my brothers and sisters on a daily basis, I know I will enter into a deep depression. I will miss assignments, forget events, not show up to work. I will turn into the "stupid, lazy, affirmative action Black woman" they already think I am. So instead I press on, immersing myself in my studies, networking, going above and

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*Image by Tord Remme*

beyond. I study the systems and administration at my university; watching what decisions they do or do not make with regards to diversity and inclusion. I focus all of my assignments around the topics of social justice, allyhood, and student activism. I set my sights on one day 'fixing things.' I have gone from an active organizer to a theoretical student, and it hurts. I frequently find myself wishing I was helping to mobilize change as opposed to writing another paper. But for now, this is my action.

Still, I can not just throw away my identity. I am a Black woman. When I see students at Mizzou protest and create change, I both empathize with and am inspired by their experience. I have only ever attended PWIs and can easily say that the problems students at Mizzou faced are not an anomaly. I do my part in remaining an ally and advocate within my own campus communities. I stand in solidarity with Mizzou. I stand in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter. I bring up topics that might make others uncomfortable to the forefront of our classroom discussions. I actively engage in social justice education in hopes that the undergraduates who I work with will take these lessons into their future. I research student activism specifically, in hopes of one day being able to fully support more students like the ones at Mizzou who organized and created positive change in their college community. I will always be a community organizer at heart.