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"Okay, Sorry," with Dr. L'Pree

Julie Hikari Mebane

As I listen intently to Dr. L'Pree, a professor at the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, speak on a panel, it does not cross my mind that her presence is revolutionary until she remarks, "I've never protested on the streets because I protest in the classroom every single day. Professors do not look like me." She says this even though she exudes *educator* with every sentence she speaks. Weeks later, when I enter her office to better understand her experience as a professor and woman of color, I leave with a portrait of what a professor can be. As a college freshman, I find myself shrinking in classrooms and hesitating to even raise my hand. The thought of interviewing a professor brings a migration of butterflies to my stomach. I enter her office with an apology already formed on my lips: "Okay, sorry."

I have prepared a list of questions to ask, but "Okay, sorry" ends up evoking the best response. Dr. L'Pree smoothly asks me, "What are you apologizing for?" I was in Dr. L'Pree's office, but her presence makes it feel like a classroom, as she is already giving me bullet points to take note of. "First step, don't apologize if you haven't done anything wrong."

It was only two weeks prior when an older, much wiser senior told me the issues perpetuated with women apologizing. Dr. L'Pree's authority stops the apology I am about to stutter; I am sorry for forgetting to not be sorry. Her authority does not only stop me, but Dr. L'Pree also does not hesitate to stop her classes

to teach the same lesson she tells me.

She recounts that the first phenomenon of teaching as a woman of color is noticing the patterns of her female students apologizing before speaking their ideas. "Sometimes boys do it, too," she notes, "But most of the time, it's girls trained to be apologetic for saying what we think or having an idea." Then, she matter-of-factly states, "If you have a comment, there's no apology with that." I have found that the best teachers explain the most difficult concepts with a simplicity that makes you wonder why you were ever confused.

Dr. L'Pree talks with an expertise that comes from experience, which includes five degrees and fifteen years of higher education. She began as a biology major at MIT in 1998,



Dr. Charisse L'Pree

with the intention of becoming a geneticist, but organic chemistry took the fun out of biology, leading her to pursue a double-major in neuroscience and media studies. Dr. L'Pree headed to school at the University of Southern California and earned her masters at the film school where she also obtained her PhD.

Dr. L'Pree says, "As a woman of color, you are kind of at the bottom of the hierarchy. At any given point, you have to be three or four times as good for people to believe you." The more I listen to Dr. L'Pree speak, the more I understand her readiness to prevent my "Okay, sorry" mentality. This is a woman who realized that she wouldn't be heard if she constantly apologized for speaking up.

Dr. L'Pree did not have the luxury of being perceived as equally educated. Even in her own classroom, where she is by far the most educated, she is still challenged. She tells me about a time when a student raised his hand and said, "I don't believe you." I see the scene unfolding. I feel as if I am watching my younger sibling question our mother's authority. Dr. L'Pree responds to the student, "Had you been following the social media feed for this class, you would have seen that I posted this two days ago." For my sake, Dr. L'Pree poses a rhetorical question, "At what point do you think that the university, and your parents, and you—if you are paying your own bills—have decided that I am qualified to teach this class, but [now] you have decided that I am not?" She later adds, "And that is the protest every single day in the classroom." Listening to Dr. L'Pree pose this makes me relate to the students in her classroom who react to other students using the word *colored*. She tells me, "It's really sweet because I see my students. One student will say *colored*...and faces turn

like, 'She said *colored*,' and I let it go." I feel my neck turning around, hoping someone else just heard what I did. After addressing how the word *colored* is problematic, she lets it go. After addressing an unbelievably disrespectful student, she lets it go. Like the expert protester Dr. L'Pree is, she marches on.

Anyone who has shared a sentence with Dr. L'Pree must also see the absurdity, almost to the point of amusement, that she is challenged based on the intersectionality of her gender and race. She tells me, "It's funny, I was talking to [a] colleague and it's like, 'Man, everyone thinks I'm a student. Nobody believes what I say.' She's like, 'That must change when you open your mouth right?'" I am asking that same question. Dr. L'Pree has a direct and loud voice; she mentions this too, noting the struggles her softer-spoken colleagues face that her "twenty years of smoking cigarettes voice" shields her from. She also takes this time to acknowledge her light skin and the privilege it carries. "My girlfriends who are darker are constantly dealing with this. So I have a unique privilege even though I am a woman of color. I am light skinned.... I am tall. I am able to carry myself in a space that I know is unique and not the experience of my other fellow women of color in academia." Her fellow women of color in academia make up a shockingly small club. According to Catalyst, "Black women hold 3.7% of tenure-track positions and 2.2% of tenured positions; Asian women hold 4.8% of tenure-track positions and 2.6% of tenured positions; Hispanic women hold 2.5% of tenure-track positions and 2.3% of tenured positions."

Dr. L'Pree's protest and struggle lies in her experiences and facts, which are enough for

Layout by Abigail Welles. Photograph courtesy of Dr. L'Pree.

me to begin to realize how deep the color line flows. But for the skeptics she says, "Look at the numbers." The chances of women of color receiving tenure are significantly less than men. "Facts, and science, and statistics exist whether or not you believe them," she says.

The percentages of women of color in academia shock me. In this case, seeing is not believing. Women are simply not seen at the front of the classroom. Dr. L'Pree recalls being upset about never seeing a woman lead a classroom for a long time and then realizing, "Wait no! I watched my mother teach college when I was five." Dr. L'Pree's mother is mostly Chinese, but besides differences in hair texture—Dr. L'Pree with her curly hair and her mother with straight hair—it is a classic tale of like mother, like daughter, at least as far as their professions go. It is just as I had suspected; teaching flows through Dr. L'Pree's veins. Throughout the interview, I am jotting down articles and concepts she mentions for me to look at later ooon. "You should look into why women of color go cold in the classroom. This idea that you have to [remain] stoic...because they already see you as their mother or [their] sister and, when you're young, 'Oh, you're my best friend.' So you have to try twice as hard." The questions I ask are a little awkward and do not always flow, but Dr. L'Pree is a fountain of information. Great teachers provide the answers to questions I did not know needed to be asked.

Her voice leads the conversation. Dr. L'Pree has been routinely questioned and challenged, but this seems to be just another learning tool for her. She says, "You could teach from the textbook that talks about all the formality of how race, gender, and so forth are taught, but there are very few people [who] look like me in the front of the class-

room. Therefore, I'm going to teach students how I learned about these materials [as opposed to] how they think they need to learn."

This is Dr. L'Pree's mission. She tells her students about the missing white woman syndrome and how, "We value missing white women like nobody's business." She educates in hopes that her students can stop and think, "Is [this] the fifth white woman I've covered and none of them are the Black and Brown girls who have gone missing in the Bronx? I think I'm going to try to cover one of those tomorrow." Her confidence and unapologetic attitude to announce her goals inspires me. Without hesitation she says, "My goal was always to make media better by educating the audience, and right now, I'm making media better by educating the producers. I think I'm making it better."

Dr. L'Pree doesn't look like your average professor based on statistics but, in spirit, she embodies everything I believe an educator should be. Her presence is revolutionary, not because of her skin color or hair texture, but because of her defiance against a white and straight structure. She tells me, "We have to remember I'm going to rock the boat today. Period. I'm going to make the conscious choice to rock the boat today. We say sorry because we think we're rocking the boat as opposed to saying, 'I'm going to rock this boat.'" I am grateful to have entered her office with an apology on my lips. I am happy to leave with her wise words stuck in my head: "Don't apologize and do what you want to do and make sure you do well and don't make excuses."

Works Cited

Catalyst. "Women In Academia," 9 July 2015. Web.