

## **Superwoman Lives, (At Least in My Head): Reflections of a Mid-Level Professional in Student Affairs**

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Being from a typical African-American descent, my family struggled through a history tarnished by the legacy of slavery and racism in America. Many of these personal family stories of struggle I received through an oral tradition. One memory of particular interest that I have is of my grandfather warning all of his grandchildren about “not letting the man hold us down” and “always strive to be the best, even if that means giving 150%.” My grandfather instilled in me at an early age the expectation to persevere in greatness despite disparity. Being the eldest of two daughters and a Navy “brat,” I learned early in life the importance of discipline, hierarchy, and hard work. I was expected to follow through on the assigned task, whether it was cleaning my room, graduating from college with a doctorate degree, or volunteering for a cleanup.

If I had to describe an image to represent success, I often picture Superwoman; beautiful and Black, striking and strong in stature with gorgeous, long hair and a red flowing red cape. Superwoman is able to do anything. All she has to do is “Simply Do It.” Superwoman is a high-powered executive with a wonderful family life.

Since graduating in May 1994 with my master’s degree in student personnel in higher education, I have achieved many triumphs, both professionally and personally. Much of my professional life was spent in residence life and student activities on three campuses, Wake Forest University, Nova Southeastern University, and University of Florida. At each school, I made valuable contributions not only to the institution, but to the students I served. My work in many areas of student affairs allowed me to develop skills in program management, program development, and organizational change. It is my hope that these skills will assist me in my goal of becoming a vice president of student affairs.

I knew when I started my career as a Black woman in higher education that there was an unwritten expectation that I would shoulder multiple roles and responsibilities. The “double whammy” of gender and race creates problems

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on both the professional and personal levels. Many researchers on this topic report that Black women in academics must contend with the professional pressures associated with working in a historically White, upper middle-class, male-dominated profession, while also attempting to balance the demands of life outside the professional domain. It would be correct to say that I shouldered each of these responsibilities without truly examining which ones were responsibilities I wanted.

Two years ago, I thought I had successfully maintained a home life which consisted of a nine year marriage and two beautiful boys, ages six and four. I believed that I had a balanced life. Without much difficulty, I successfully navigated from an entry-level position in housing to a relatively large mid-level position in student activities while also having a family. I believed I was the embodiment of the archetype Black Superwoman. I could do anything and everything at the speed of light. My motto was “Just Do It!” With those thoughts in mind, I continued my education to earn my doctorate because I knew that I was Superwoman.

As I began my doctorate as Superwoman, I had a husband, children, and a career. Unlike other women acquaintances, I thought I had ample time and energy to devote to all three. In my mind, my husband was never neglected, my children were well-behaved and well-dressed at all times, the house was reasonably well kept, I had a social life, and my career was in high gear. I even believed that I had extra time which I devoted to being an adjunct faculty member, teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses. To anyone who asked me how I had time to do all that and go back to school, my patent answer was, “I just do it!”

Ironically, the past two years have taught me something entirely different. Even Superwoman cannot do it all. While obtaining my doctorate degree at the breakneck speed of two and a half years, I realized that I was actually on a journey toward self-destruction. My experience as a working mother provided me, I thought, with a sense of flexibility, which every doctoral candidate must possess. Passion, dedication and desire are the internal instincts that have brought me this far in life, and are the core characteristics that I was relying on to carry me through my doctorate work. Similarly, I displayed my dedication in many different areas, including motherhood and employment. It was that dedication that became my downfall.

I soon was stressed out, overworked, and physically exhausted. My husband was neglected, and my children never saw me. My students began avoiding me because they thought I was going to explode any minute. My co-workers were really concerned, expressing, “You just don’t seem like you are at the top of your game.”

By the time I began my qualifying exams, it took extreme effort simply to get out of bed. I had gained 30 pounds, and I was using unhealthy amounts of caffeine. By the time I defended my dissertation, most of the time I was hurting, physically and mentally. My body had betrayed me by succumbing to the only thing that could stop Superwoman, kryptonite, or in my case, fibromyalgia.

Fibromyalgia is stiffness and pain felt in fibrous tissues, and it is usually deep within the muscles, accompanied by emotional tension reflected in the severe knotting of the muscles. Basically, my body muscles refused to relax, resulting in intense pain throughout my body. I wonder how this could happen to me. I am the Black Superwoman. Hear me roar! (Albeit roaring in pain).

It occurred to me that I was so busy trying to prove myself to other people that I had forgotten one of the most valuable lessons my parents had taught me. This lesson was to challenge myself to create space for my life and build my priorities around my life, rather than trying to build my life around my priorities.

In reflection, I remember a time when I let my need to function as Superwoman override sensible decisions. One example was my decision to go back to work eight days after the birth of my first son. I really believed that I would be letting the department down if I were not there at the start of the school year.

Today, I know that there really was no need to be what everyone else wanted me to be. I have become secure in the knowledge that I have the right to set my own priorities, not simply doing what others wanted. I learned that to have it all, I had to make sacrifices. For me to achieve balance, it requires practice, concentration, and self-confidence. It requires a supportive husband, a not-so perfect house, and a strong support system. My priorities are my family, my students, and my career. I decided what was important to me. My family and I build my life around the understanding that it is essential for me to put myself and my family first.

Initially in my career, when I heard individuals tell others to put themselves first, my usual reaction was "but that is being selfish." Today my reaction is exactly the opposite. I now understand that the more that one invests in one's own physical and emotional well being, the more one is able to support others. What have I learned? I have learned that if one is worn out, tired, and agitated, one has little to give others. I have learned to slow down, to think about my real priorities, and to take care of myself. Most importantly, I have learned that I am NOT Superwoman. I am Colette, and that is simply fine.