

THE BELL: Hearts & Minds

Extra Credit – Brian

Brian (high school student): In the schools I've attended, I've had a combined total of... three Caucasian classmates, and that's out of over 12 years of school experience.

Taylor McGraw: Hey listeners, I'm Taylor McGraw, editor of The Bell. We just wrapped up our first season, called Hearts & Minds, but there's still a bunch of material left that we'll be releasing in these extra credit segments. I'm really excited for this one, featuring a young man named Brian.

Brian grew up in Crown Heights and went to elementary and middle school there. Then, in the fall of 8th grade, like all New York City students, Brian had a big decision to make: where to attend high school.

Brian: At that time is when I began to think about like career wise what I wanted to do. I went and I was just on the computer. I was looking up random things, knew I was good at math and science. I wanted to find a career that would be reflective of that. And I came across engineering, and I was like I wanted to go somewhere that's gonna set me up to be an engineer.

Taylor: If you're wondering why Brian is thinking about his career as a 13-year-old, well, it's because a lot of high schools in New York City – especially in low-income neighborhoods – are really small and have a special theme or focus: law & justice, performing arts, math & science. Large, well-rounded high schools are mostly extinct. I'll get into this in more depth in a future segment, but the point is, the decision about where to go to high school is a big one. Brian wound up at Transit Technical High School in East New York, an impoverished neighborhood on the outskirts of Brooklyn. Transit Tech is one of about 45 CTE high schools in the city.

Brian: CTE stands for Career and Technical Education. In other words it's a trade school, my trade being an electrician.

Taylor: I asked Brian to run down his typical daily schedule.

Brian: School starts at 8:10. First period class is my AP Literature class. After English I have government, then I have Spanish. 4th period I have a leadership class where we are developing peer tutoring skills. Around 12, I leave school and go to work. Today, it consisted of me going out to Long Island City. And from 1:30-3:30 I am a DSF employee.

Taylor: DSF – Department of School Facilities

Brian: After that, I am still a student athlete so I go to practices. Sometimes it's a little hard to do.

Taylor: His internship sounded really cool. But I was a little puzzled by what wasn't on his schedule: no science or math.

Brian: I finished all the math courses my school had to offer in my sophomore year.

Taylor (during interview): What were those courses?

Brian: It was trig and geometry.

Taylor: Brian's experience reminds me of Noah's – the student at the center of our first two episodes. In fact, Brian and Noah went to middle school just a few blocks apart in Crown Heights – both were near the top of their classes. Then they both went to a high school in East New York and when they got there they both ran out of math classes to take after 10th grade.

Brian: I mean, it's through through no fault of my own I haven't been able to take those classes. They are classes that my school doesn't offer. So I do feel in a way disadvantaged because I know other schools had them and everything and considering my major I'd be put at a disadvantage to some other kids, especially those going into the same field as I am. But I am confident enough in my abilities to learn that once I'm in the class I would be able to get what I need from it and perform at a level which is required.

Taylor: For Brian, being at a disadvantage is nothing new.

Brian: In middle school at the time I wasn't sure I was getting like the best education. Not that it was like super important to me. Let me clarify that. Not that it wasn't important, but I didn't really know about the different levels of education. The difference of education that someone in a more affluent neighborhood would be getting compared to what I was getting.

Taylor: You mean you didn't understand there was a difference.

Brian : Right I wasn't really exposed to that kind of thought process yet. I didn't know there was really much of a difference. School was school. Getting into higher grades, you know, 7th and 8th grade and you start to learn about concepts like that, and I felt like maybe I was at a disadvantage having this public education in a little neighborhood. I wasn't sure if I would be up to par with other school kids, kids from other schools in different kinds of

neighborhoods. But now I can look back at what I did in my middle school and say that had it not been for the education that I got and some of the teachers that I had, I could have been a lot worse off.

Taylor: Only 13% of students at Brian's middle school passed the state math test the year he was in 8th grade. Like many schools in New York City, Brian's have all had super high concentrations of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Like 90-plus percent. And like you heard him say at the start of the episode – there have had only a few white kids.

Brian: All of my school's are predominantly African American and Hispanic. Do I find it a problem? Yes and no. I mean no because that's just what you're around anyway. That's what you're comfortable with and that's ok I guess. But yes it is a problem in the sense that you're not really getting the experiences that the world will have left for you because nowhere in the world is it just completely all black or all Asian or all white. The things you learn between races, the type of diversity that you'll need to be kind of successful in life will be geared outside of your own personal race. There's just different things you can learn from other races, other cultures, things that you won't normally be exposed to or hear or think of.

Brian: Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure most people will agree racism does still definitely exist. The way you talk about it is different though. And the way it is viewed publicly is different. But it's implicitly still there. The city, I believe, has been geared that they please who they favor. It's a terrible statement to want to make. It's a terrible statement to say that you believe is true... but it is.

Manhattan. I can't go more than half a block without seeing a garbage can, or at least three because they have the recycling ones in certain places. When in East New York, some corners you don't even have a garbage can. You go three maybe four blocks without seeing not one kind of trash bin. Again, that's geared on communities. Like I know downtown Brooklyn they have the street sweeping initiative or whatever that is where like they have people that walk around and sweep up trash with their garbage pans and everything. They have that now around where I live in Crown Heights, but that's new. That hasn't been there up until around two or three years ago, around the same time they began to gentrify. So it's the little things that you don't really notice that tell you a lot about what's actually going on. And whose fault is it? There's a lot of fingers pointed in different directions about whose fault certain things are. But then you have to think about how hard it is for certain people to be heard. Or to make change, effect change. And again, that is based on race. So it's not that everyone is lazy and nobody wants to get anything done about it, but the time that you spend trying to effect some kind of change it looks like nothing's getting done.

Taylor: Brian said if he were in charge and could get things done, he has some ideas for the school system.

Brian: Not making every high school like specific or career oriented. Like not making every school some kind of vocational school for a different trade or anything because it's great to have those general ed schools where like you still have the undecided people. They don't really know what they're going to do yet. Give them a little taste of different things and let them decide.

Give schools the opportunities to diversify the kind of things kids are exposed to. You know, not just sitting down and getting ready for the Common Core standards, getting ready to take a test but giving more opportunities to be involved in real world things. Making it more available to have college fairs in your school or more college visits as trips. Having classes that better prepare you for life in general afterwards. I'd totally be down for a class now that's gonna teach me how to file taxes because I have no idea how I'm going to do that.

Taylor: Brian's not the only student with ideas. But when adult leaders make education policy, students are usually the last ones they ask for input. This needs to change. I've been really inspired by Brian and the other students featured in this season – and all of the members of Teens Take Charge who are taking it upon themselves to make sure their voices are heard.

Speaking of that: If you are a New York City student and want your voice to be heard, go to bellpodcast.com and click on “Get Involved.” Fill out the short form. We'll read it and get in touch with you soon. If you're an adult ally who wants to help – you can also go to bellpodcast.com and click “Get Involved” to find tools that connect you to DOE contact forms, volunteer opportunities and more.

And finally, Follow us on Twitter and Facebook @bellpodcast. Message us questions, feedback, or story ideas. We want to hear from you. That's @bellpodcast. Do it now before you forget.

Before we go, just a quick update on Brian. He's a freshman this fall at the University at Buffalo. He left me a voicemail the other day.

Brian: Hey Taylor it's Brian. Just calling to let you know how things are going. I do continue to plan on getting my bachelor's in engineering. The challenges associated with that are the fact that there is a gap present between how you learn in high school and how you learn here. But I feel like professors understand that there's that gap, and there's a certain margin for error and mistake that they help guide you in overcoming that. It's not high school,

you're not going to be coddled the whole way, but it's enough that you can get yourself on the right path. One of the challenges I have with me, well everyone, can be overcoming your own insecurities. You know, understanding when you need help, how to pursue help, you know to maintain yourself. Overall, college is pretty fun so far. Interacting with different people, different cultures, different majors. Getting involved in different sports and clubs. I play rugby now. I have friends that like hold mock trial club, black student union. Lots of things to stay busy and stay involved and as long as you are willing and open it's a great environment to learn and network and, you know, find yourself.

Taylor: We'll have more Extra Credit segments coming your way soon. Please share The Bell with your friends and colleagues – you are our marketing budget. Take care everybody and thanks for listening.