

# Personal essay: Lake Oswego's worst-kept secret

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From the Desk of  
Sen. Wagner

By BRUCE POINSETTE

I wish I could say I was surprised to read that three football players from my Alma Mater Lake Oswego High School (LOHS) were suspended for targeting a former Black teammate with racist tweets, but I know better.

I was watching from the bench on the infamous night when our crowd broke out into chants of "You can't read," and "Hooked on phonics," to taunt a Black Lincoln High School basketball player. It was an embarrassing time to say I represented LOHS and yet it provided a glimpse into the daily problematic behavior that is persistent throughout the school.

As a Black student who went through the Lake Oswego (LO) school system, I've seen a culture of both systemic and overt racism that isolates students of color, especially Black.

The town has the nickname "Lake No Negro" (or as one of the suspended football players put it, "Lake NoN\*\*\*\*\*") for a reason. According to Census Data, LO has a Black population of 0.7 percent.

I've lived in LO all my life, written for the town newspaper, played in high school band and was on LOHS's only state championship basketball team, yet I still catch people pointing and staring at me like a zoo animal when I walk through town.

When I was in school I stood out like sore thumb and was reminded of it all the time.

In kindergarten, a Saudi student named Muhammad and I, the only two children of color in the class, were separated from the rest of the students and told we could play with blocks while the teacher taught the others how to read. My mother still gets upset when she remembers the

class Reading Night and how I struggled in front of all my classmates and their parents. My kindergarten teacher would go on to suggest that I be held back, which my parents had to fight.

This was just one of many instances where teachers had lower expectations of me than my white peers. In sixth grade I had to get 100 percents on every Wordly Wise test for five straight weeks to prove I deserved to be in an advanced group and was proficient enough in a textbook I had completed three years earlier at another school. I was told by a counselor that I "didn't look like a TAG student," when I applied for the Talented and Gifted (TAG) program in seventh grade.

During high school basketball season, coaches didn't seem to care when other Black players were late or didn't attend classes, as long as they were eligible to play. As a junior I remember asking a spring league basketball coach to excuse me from a game (other players missed games for AAU and spring football practices with no punishment) so I could take my SATs. My minutes were drastically cut for the rest of the season.

Unfortunately, the attitudes of offending adults seemed to manifest in students' daily interactions. The hallways and playgrounds were a hotbed for racist jokes and other offenses.

I've lost count of the times I was told, "I didn't know you could talk like that," because I didn't sound like someone from a BET music video, which is sadly the only exposure many of my white peers had to Black people.

Jokes that I only got into my advanced classes because of Affirmative Action were also a favorite of many students.

What's disturbing is that while some people were mean spirited, the vast majority really didn't understand they were being offensive. The idea of respecting culture was a joke, both literally and figuratively.

Meanwhile, any serious discussion of inequality by a minority was met with the accusation that "You must hate white people."

Five years removed from high school graduation, I would be naive to think this culture of racial ignorance and white privilege has somehow been eradicated. Statements by school officials and

parents trying to frame the football players' twitter comments as an isolated incident are misleading.

A racially insensitive, antagonizing environment has been the worst kept secret for generations.

This is an opportunity to be honest and address the root of intolerance in LO, rather than launch another public relations campaign that pretends race is not an issue in "Lake No Negro."

*This essay originally ran in "The Skanner," a website and newspaper published in Portland and Seattle. Bruce Poinsette graduated from Lake Oswego High School in 2007 and in June from the University of Oregon, where he wrote opinion pieces for the student newspaper, the Oregon Daily Emerald. He now writes for "The Skanner" and blogs at [www.brucepoinsette.com](http://www.brucepoinsette.com). He continues to live in Lake Oswego.*