

## LINES: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RACE

By **Stephanie Sandberg**, in collaboration with a diverse company of actors, designers, and theatre technicians.

The play is performed by ten actors, cross-racially.

For a clip of the play's original performance online, see <https://vimeo.com/108799897>

### PROLOGUE IN DARKNESS

*As the theatre darkens, the actors enter the space from all corners of the theatre. They carry flashlights that are not yet on. As the theatre is engulfed in complete black, the ushers cover the exit signs and we hear in the darkness:*

**Julianne:** Close your eyes. Close 'em.

**All:** (breathing together). Can you tell the color of my skin by the sound of my voice?

**Lewis:** Can you tell where I live?

**Jean:** Do you know where I work?

**Michael:** What church I attend?

**David:** What education I have?

**Calin:** How much money I make?

**Lorna:** Can you tell the color of my skin by the sound of my voice?

**Edye:** Do you know my family history?

**Rena:** My personal beliefs?

**Julianne:** My faith?

**Lewis:** My values?

**Jean:** What kind of suffering I've experienced?

**Michael:** The source of my happiness?

**Calin:** Do you understand my experience?

## Lines Complete 7

**Lorna:** Can you tell where I fit?

**All:** Within the lines of this city?

*The following lines are pre-recorded and woven into this prologue.*

**Jean:** We've been separated for so long that um, sometimes we just can't talk.

**Michael:** The expectation is, don't cross the line. Don't you dare think about crossing that line.

**David:** I do think there is a certain kind of code for "I don't want to live around black people" and I don't know what that's about.

**Lewis:** like I gotta get outta here, I gotta do something different, because I want my story to be different

**Calin:** just put a sign out front: "Poor people, go away" black people, you are not welcome here

**Edye:** I think that you can learn how to survive in Grand Rapids as a poor black person, especially if you are a poor black person with some personality. You can survive because people wanna help you.

**Julianne:** Can folks live wherever they want? Not in this town. I mean, you think you can. That's an illusion in America. The American dream is not out there for everyone.

**Lorna:** All the invisible lines, the color lines that we draw without even realizing it.

**Rena:** I think we do need to address white privilege, but I don't know how. I don't know how.

**Jean:** No Child Left Behind was supposed to take down lines. It added them. Like crazy.

**Michael:** We think it's normal to worship separately, we think it's normal. And it isn't.

**Lewis:** it was a culture shock  
I'd come from such an extreme Caucasian background and to go to Ottawa Hills where it was  
99.9% African-American students, or students of color  
I was suddenly in the majority and had no idea how to deal with that

**Calin:** I see white people and black people struggling to understand what's really real

**Edye:** Now I'm understanding that I cheated my kids as far as their education went, because I bought into the fact that the Christian school system was a good place for them to be. Um...they were taught by me to be color blind.

**Lorna:** We're finding evidence of differences of treatment on the basis of race in over 50% of our tests right now, which is, which is substantial.

Lines Complete 7

**Rena:** And I don't think there's any question that when you look at the houses in this neighborhood you can tell where the white people live and where the black people live. You can tell.

**Jean:** One of the things that I find interesting is that denial of racism and, and, I'm older, but certainly, um, one generation before me is, is very racist and two generations are unbelievably racist

**Michael:** Uh, are you concerned so much about the city? Where do you live at? Do you live in the city?

**Calin:** You know, it isn't something we say, "Well I, I don't wanna be with white people."  
Or "I don't wanna be with black people."

**Rena:** it's been really hard, like you said, the gentrification word gets brought up and the way I talk to folks about that, because I get that from all of my friends, like, "How do you feel about being part of the gentrification?"

**David:** And that's all the bad stuff, and there's a bunch of good stuff, too, and Grand Rapids Public is a mix of good and bad -- and if it fails, we're to blame, that's the way we look at.

**Lorna:** and then, ya know, one of the narratives in America is that America is this great country because we had all these natural resources and then we built this wonderful country and I just want to say "wait a minute -- those resources you're talking about were stolen from Native Americans

*During this prologue, the actors use their flashlights to illuminate one another as necessary and at the end they shine them onto the audience and then, onto the stage where one Actor 1 Stands alone, now isolated in a projected grid of the city of Grand Rapids. She Speaks:*

**Actor One (Anita Lockwood):** I live here in Grand Rapids and I lived here all my life, born here in 1952. Seen a lot of changes to this town in that time, but the thing that always strikes me when I go away and come back....like if I go to Atlanta or New York City where I have family and friends....if I go to these places and come back, here's what I see. Lines. Like this one here that we can see between Calvin street and Benjamin Street.

Bat. Boom (she gestures with her hands)

Bat you got Benjamin with a not so tidy look to it although I take care of my yard pretty good. And most of these houses is rentals and not owned by the folks living in them. And there's a crack house on this street. Yes maam. And I ain't pointing it out to ya, but watch, open your eyes and you'll see. There's poverty on this street. Some gang violence. Trouble brewing all the time.

Boom. Then you go one street over and you're in an entirely different world and a lily white one at that. Quiet. Tidy. Peaceful.

But who drew that line? Where'd it come from? You tell me. You figure that out and then you got something to write about.

## Lines Complete 7

Those is lines. Pay attention. Open your eyes and you can see them.

### HOUSING/WEALTHY STREET

**Headline Projection: Boundary Lines: Can you live anywhere you choose in this city?**

**Projections: Images of maps and photos of GR throughout the years.**

*These first lines are spoken chorally, almost simultaneous, overlapping and intersecting.*

**David May:** the boundaries were, as I recall them, from Division Street West over to Rumsey Park and sort of from probably Burton Street to Wealthy Street.

that whole area, from Franklin Street to Hall for sure. And, then east of Division up to Madison,

**Victoria Gibbs:** the boundaries were really clear as to how far black people could go, my experience was 28th on the South, Fuller on the East, and Michigan on the North and 131 on the west.

**Kevin Morales:** I live on Benjamin Street, right off of Wealthy, and, so many times, my, my friends, um, have told, my friends from Grand Rapids have told me, "Oh, you live, like, you're *just* on the wrong side of Wealthy Street."

**Tami Vandenberg:** I lived on Sherman Street for 5 years, I still own a house there then I lived on Bemis a couple different times, and now I live on Milton, so I lived on the other side of Fuller, in Easttown,

**Anonymous Woman 1:** When we moved here, my parents decided to live on the South East side of town where we were told there were better schools, but very quickly we moved to East Grand Rapids

**Laura Carpenter:** When I drive down Wealthy Street, when I turn right off of Madison on Wealthy Street, I . . . I get so angry. I cannot even describe it to you. I get so angry.

**Guy Bazzani:** Well let's define the community; in this uptown, east hills area... 'cause that's certainly what I've been focused on, Uh, from Union St. to Easttown, from Wealthy to Fulton, ok?

**Edye:** And we had actually a, the north end was actually new Black area. Um, it was called Auburn Hills and it was all teachers, professional people, who had their own area. It was right in back of Northeast, where City [High School] is now.

**George Heartwell:** The original cluster where the color was breached was in the neighborhood Fuller North of Leonard, the Auburn Hills neighborhood, where in the late 19, mid 1960s the color line was breached in Grand Rapids.

*A few more phrases added in here, possibly recorded, neighborhoods and terms like "Crystal Springs" "Easttown" "East Hills" "The Hood" "Wyoming" "Kentwood" "Heartside" etc....*

**Matthew Daley:** in Grand Rapids, four of the major banks in the city collapses in 1933. Uh, the Great Banking Failure that started in Detroit and radiated out across the country.

## Lines Complete 7

In 1936, the city did what is called the First Photo Survey.  
These assessments are going to be used to begin to assess risk.  
This is the real origins of redlining.

**Randall Jelks:** Um, in, in, literally in all, in, in, most urban neighborhoods where black and Hispanic people live, insurance companies literally took a pen, with a red pen, and drew lines and said those are neighborhoods that we're not gonna, that they are not worth investing in.  
They call it redlining.

**Matthew Daley:** And so, uh, you can see the red sections along in here will be along the industrial section, near downtown. And then the ones right over here in the red sections, those are gonna be the traditional African American neighborhoods in the city.

**Randall Jelks:** This, Miss Essie lives over here. Has lived in this little house over here. Bought that house. And I remember we were fighting the banks. She couldn't get a loan, and she had 3000 dollars in the banks, she couldn't get a loan from Old, then it was, um, Old Kent, to get a new roof on her house. Right? Cause they redlined this neighborhood.

Now here's a black woman who bought that house years ago with hard earned money.  
She needs 6000 to get a loan for her roof. She can't get a roof because the bank's not gonna give her a loan.

That's structural. That's not about individuals.

When you come along and say, look at, look at how these people keep these houses. But then the houses go down so much, then you got rental landlords coming by, then, then the neighborhood really goes down. Cause there's no longer home ownership. And that happened all through this neighborhood. And that's, that's, that's the invisible line.

**George Heartwell:** The original cluster where the color lines breached was in the neighborhood... Fuller north of Leonard, the Auburn Hills neighborhood.

**Edye:** The north end was actually new Black area. Um, it was called Auburn Hills and it was all teachers, professional people. It was right in back of Northeast, where City [High School] is now. So that was a very big thing to have these black businessmen buy up this land and build houses. So we moved um, there...yeah, it was late 60's, early 70's.

I loved growing up in Auburn Hills. Everyone respected their property.

We were truly a neighborhood.

I know it was very difficult in the beginning because the city didn't want black people developing that land...and I know my best friend, who was one of the first people to move in that area, had a terrible time. She told me stories of how white kids threw bleach on her and called her names in school. But now as adults....we both agree. It was a great place to grow up. The fight was worth it.

**George Heartwell:** There's still sort of perceived color lines—you know that basically people who are white live in these neighborhoods. I think it's very difficult if you are of color to move into certain neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, or maybe more to the point, to be accepted in certain neighborhoods in Grand Rapids.

**Victoria Gibbs:** When I lived here in as a young person in High school, the boundaries were really clear as to how far black people could go, my experience was 28th on the South, Fuller on the East, and Michigan

## Lines Complete 7

on the North and 131 on the west. There was no reason to go any farther than that to do anything, that was all that was necessary to know...

When I was older, I moved out to 68th st and division so it was my intent to have my sons in an environment where they were not able to hang out on the corners and were not exposed to all the inner-city riff raff

**Anonymous Woman 1:** When we moved here, my parents decided to live on the South East side of town where we were told there were better schools, but very quickly we moved to East Grand Rapids because the Garfield Park area where we were living was already, experiencing, some, uh, violence and my brother got hit a few times at school and on his way home from school. I was only three by this point, so I don't know, but we moved. What I am sure of is that my parents moved because of black people moving into the neighborhood, but I'm sure you hear about stuff like that all the time.

**Victoria Gibbs:** I lived in an uh one of those manufactured houses and I had to ride past a little statue of a black man holding a lantern everyday to get to my house and I really wanted to go in the middle of the night and take that little sucker out of their yard ah ah ha-ha ha ha ha aha so, for me to move back into the intercity of Grand Rapids was a better choice for me personally after my kids were grown and out of the house. I feel much more comfortable living in the inner city. I don't have to wonder... am I at home?

**Elizabeth:** What we do is, [at the Fair Housing Commission] we have a pool of volunteers who are fully trained as testers, And what they do is, we would send an African American tester and a Caucasian tester, ...they'd have the same family size, the same income, the same credit score, they'd be from the same area. So everything was controlled where the only difference would be their race. And so once we get [information] back from both testers, we compare them side by side and, and look for major differences in treatment. The African American testers are quoted higher rental rates, shown less favorable units, shown units in the back with, with fewer amenities. I mean, these are the kinds of things that we see over and over.

**Jean:** My husband and I are landlords. We live on the first floor and rent out several apartments above us. So we're in the habit, for a number of years now, of interviewing people for renting an apartment. We've gotten fairly good at um, you could say narrowing down the field of possible applicants from phone messages. There's a lot you can sort of tell by a voice. About ten years ago, a young woman left a message...but I could barely understand her. She had a pretty heavy accent, and my initial response was, you know, if she's not clear, I'm just not going to call her back. She persisted. She called again. As it turned out she was born and raised in China. And it was just the way she had expressed herself over the phone – I'd made assumptions about her intelligence and her background...oh, she's someone who I'm gonna have difficulty with. Well, when she and her husband came to look at the apartment, we immediately liked them. They turned out to be one of the best tenants we've ever had and we have remained friends.

**Elizabeth:** less than 2% of people pursue a, a fair housing violation for a number of reasons, whether it's they don't know that they've been discriminated against or if they do know they don't know where to go or Or, it might not be their most immediate need. That's another thing. People just wanna move on. They just wanna forget. And there are those people that say, "I wanna stand up so this never happens to anyone else again." But for some people it's so painful that they just want to forget and leave it behind.

## Lines Complete 7

**Nancy:** I had a case with a family, it was a husband and a wife and two kids. And they were middle income. They'd sold their house because the wife worked for a company that transferred her to Columbus. And, um, they, there were, there were townhomes and apartments right near the school, and that's where they wanted to live for, for about six months to finish out their school year.

And, um, they went there were told that, um, it was a family of four. That, um, four people couldn't live in any of the, you know, the townhomes.

The three bedroom townhomes were limited to no more than three people.

So [we] did testing and we found evidence to support that it was different, uh, different information provided based on race. And um, they decided to file the case. And when, um, [the Father], uh, was deposed, he had tears streaming down his face and he, he testified, but he said, "When I had to look my children....I had worked every day of my life, my wife had worked every day of her life, so that we wouldn't have to face this kind of discrimination. And I had to look my children in the eye and say, 'They don't want us to live here because of the color of our skin.'"

And it was so humiliating for him in front of his children to have to admit that.

It was devastating.

**Elizabeth:** We're finding evidence of differences of treatment on the basis of race in over 50% of our tests right now. Which is, which is substantial.

**Nancy:** Normally we find evidence in 33% of the tests that we do. Here today it's 57 with regard to race. 57%.

**Austin Bunn:** I came to look at homes with my mother in May 2008 without hardly knowing Grand Rapids at all.

And I had gone to Marie Catrib's as part of my job interview. And the real estate agent started proposing homes in the nearby Baxter neighborhood. So I bought this house after, like, a day and a half of looking. So when I first moved in, I was like 'Whoa, where – what is up with all these homes?'

**Anonymous Woman 1:** Wait, can I go back to that question of where I live for a sec? I want to be clear what I mean by living in a white part of town is not that I don't want people who are different around me, but I want safety. I need to be sure that when my kids are out on the street or whatever that they're safe and I feel that here. Or I should say I felt that here until there was just that shooting a couple of weeks back and then when there was the hold up at the grocery. Those things have made me feel not so safe.

**Austin Bunn:** Broken window theory  
these are small signs of  
disrepair that signal a larger sense of community disinterest  
or kind of a lack of  
you know, just kind of block consciousness

**Anonymous Woman 1:** And that's why we're moving again. I know you said you wanted to know why we were moving again. Well, that's why. And I don't think there's any question that when you look at the houses in this neighborhood you can tell where the white people live and where the black people live. You can tell.

## Lines Complete 7

**Austin Bunn:** I bought my house, and ya know what? It was really noisy the first summer I lived here, the funny thing is – that’s all the college students, so not the black families and so the first issue was, like, how do you have a conversation with college students where they’re not defensive and eventually I just called the cops, I just became *that* guy. Anyway, over time, though, since my younger colleagues have started to buy homes in town and none of them buy in this area, they all seem to buy in mid-town,— they all want to buy in Heritage Hill, but it’s too expensive.

**Jerry Bishop:** Uh, are you concerned so much about the city? Where do you live at? Do you live in the city? You so concerned about the public schools? Do you live within the boundaries of the Grand Rapids public schools or the school district that you, you wanna support? Tell me that that isn’t, isn’t a, a sincere indicator of racism, I’m moving away from you because I don’t wanna be infected by what ails you. And unfortunately the people of color have been trained that in order to move up in life, I gotta move out. I don’t like myself. I don’t like my people. So I gotta move out. The, the, the self hatred that’s perpetuated...

**Austin:** And I don’t know that it’s necessarily that my colleagues don’t want to live in this neighborhood but I do think there is a certain kind of code for “I don’t want to live around black people” and I don’t know what that’s about. They want to live near the resources they feel are essential, ya know, like Martha’s Vineyard – if you are a striver, a white striver in Grand Rapids you know about Martha’s Vineyard.

**Jerry:** Crime increases in the urban environment because people move out. White flight. Caucasians. This is a Caucasian driven phenomena over the last 30 years. Well now, who are the only people who are moving out of the city now? People of color. Who are moving back? Middle class Caucasians. It’s the epicenter of gentrification.

**Matthew:** Gentrification usually means that it comes in with people who are non-long term residents of the neighborhood. I’ve always kind of had the sense that I think white families can move into black neighborhoods with a lot less flap than the reverse. Uh, when a, when our first African American guy moved into my neighborhood in the west side, that sent the neighborhood... a-twitter. And nobody did anything weird, nobody flipped out, but it was like, “Uh oh. Here they come.” Oh, they said it. I, in fact I give my neighborhood a lot of credit. They were very upfront. They’re like, “Great. They’re comin’ up the hill now. It’s all downhill from here.”

**Erin Wilson:** Well, there’s two definitions (laughs) there’s the PR definition of gentrification is when a neighborhood that has collapsed is being revitalized by renewed investment and then the other definition is, like, when all the white people come back (laughs), so I think both of those things are just different ways of looking at the same thing that’s happening right now



**Laura Carpenter:** I remember probably about three or four years ago there was a billboard when you come off the Wealthy Street exit. And it said something like “Come to Woodland”—there’s some apartments out on I think it’s 60<sup>th</sup> and Eastern—“Come out here—it’s safe and it’s quiet.” And when I saw that, I was already thinking, *Look to me like the white folks want the people to leave the city so they can come back. So they goin’ to create space for them now in Kentwood because they coming back.*

**Austin:** I’ve gotten into so many arguments with colleagues who hear where I live and they’ll go “Oh my god, you live in the hood.”

Wealthy Street is a line, most of my colleagues will not live south of Wealthy. They see that as the hood, they’ll refer to that as the ghetto.

### **All actors say “Wealthy Street”**

**Laura:** When I drive down Wealthy Street, I get so angry. I cannot even describe it to you. I get so angry. I drive down there, and I think, Oh, now it’s safe for y’all to be here, now y’all wanna be here. Not only do you wanna be here, you’ve taken over here. So you move in a little bit— you buy one little shop, and you buy another little shop, and then they aren’t the shops that serve the people that live in the neighborhood, they aren’t even priced where people in the neighborhood can shop there, you don’t even hire the people in the neighborhood to work there.

**Guy Bazzani:** Well let’s define the community; in this uptown, east hills area... ‘cause that’s certainly what I’ve been focused on, Uh, from Union St. to Eastown, from Wealthy to Fulton, ok? And we found, uh, we found that these driving corridors, have always been very active and they’re really good economic corridors. And what we did was looked at that from a business standpoint, to work on the commercial districts in these corridors.

**Laura:** So now we’ve been designated this little “corridor improvement district,” which means that people then get some monies or tax advantages to start a business here. So what I keep sayin’ to these white people that know how to . . . who know marketing or accounting or entrepreneurial whatever you need to know . . . well, I know three or four people because I know two Africans, I know African American, I know a Caribbean person, they wanna open a restaurant, they wanna open a store. Why don’t you help them? Let’s pour some of these skills that you have into these folks, let’s help them start a business here so we can then celebrate um . . . a diversity of peoples owning businesses versus one demographic.

**Rick:** You know, it isn’t something we say, “Well I, I don’t wanna be with white people.” Or “I don’t wanna be with black people.”

It’s just, you know, for example, as we look around this restaurant today, there are no people of color here. Now that’s not something you or I had anything to do with.

You know, there’s no signs here that, like Jim Crow, that say, you know, people are not allowed to be here if they’re a certain color.

Somehow we just know that that’s how we behave and so we behave that way.

And related to Wealthy Street, uh, the more of a wealthier crowd begins to, you know, live there and do business there and buy things there, it by nature, by almost default, leaves people out.

**Jeff:** I mean, a good example of this, The Wealthy Business Alliance meeting, they were having a big discussion about

## Lines Complete 7

people putting flyers up on telephone poles, and they were opposed to it, just because it looked tacky and wasn't aesthetically pleasing, and so they had people who would go around and tear shit off, which again, for people who get around by foot, that's a way that they're gonna get information about something that's going on, they're not gonna read about it in some – ya know, they're not checking their e-mails or people aren't twittering to them ...that's not how they get their information, they either get it through word-of-mouth or get it from simple kinds of advertising like that

**Denise Mason:** And Easttown is a popular spot too because they open up a lot of more bars.

I don't have no bar I can, you know, feel comfortable and go in. Because there's more white.

I'm not seeing nobody of my color in there.

Now, why I wanna go in a place where somebody go, you know, well I don't care if they stare or whatever, but you know you, it's gonna be a whisper.

You don't feel comfortable.

I don't wanna go nowhere I don't feel comfortable.

**Guy Bazzani:** We've had some very interesting... about what the, different ethnic groups in the neighborhood think of the neighborhood. The people that move in think it's a great location, and, whatever race they are. And the people that have been here have labeled it, and the social labeling has said that it's the ghetto. I had an African American person, middle class guy, well-dressed, uh, come in to look at this building to want to rent something here. And, and he proceeded to tell me that the building wasn't worth it 'cause this is the ghetto.

the African American folks in this neighborhood- that I experienced, now- that came here, uh, behaved as if it was an extremely dangerous neighborhood. And when we've approached people who have lived in this neighborhood for years... I think, what we've discovered is that once people realize that they can get enough wherewithal to buy a home, they wouldn't buy it here. So that kind of blows the whole gentrification idea right out of the water.

**Austin:** You know how we had this conversation about Wealthy Street, and how people were sad that it's not black anymore, that absence, like "oh, this whole neighborhood's turning white, it's awful" and I was like, "well, wait a second, let's back up – what are you really trying to defend here?"

That bodega, and that kind of really crappy Laundromat and, like, that restaurant that you never see anyone in? Like, that's what you want to preserve? Wouldn't you rather have a fresh organic food market and not a food desert? Wouldn't you rather have restaurants that you would actually want to eat at?"

**Guy Bazzani:** So I think perception has been the most difficult thing to overcome on Wealthy Street, than anything else - it started up many years ago when the redlined this area, the banking industry redlined this area, and it just sticks and it sticks and it sticks.

**Austin:** So everybody has a different take on it, you know what I mean? I do like the way that Wealthy's changing, because I feel like there were a lot of empty storefronts

**Denise Mason:** Do you know that bar on Diamond and Wealthy?

Okay. It used to be a bar before, Two Stans.

And there was a mixed bar, minorities and everything.

I don't know if the owner died or whatever. The bar closed.

## Lines Complete 7

A black businessman, I forgot who, they wanted to reopen the bar.  
No. They won't give them a license.  
But, they said it wasn't gonna be a bar there anymore.  
There's a bar there now.

**Tami:** This bar used to be called The Two Stans bar,  
it was a place that we weren't sure we could come, like we used to joke about it  
like, hey, we're white, can we come in?  
(this bar closed) in like '97, '98, and then it sat here, empty,  
and we bought it in 2002, but it took us forever to get it done.  
We replaced everything. The foundation was rotten, we had to like hoist up the building and re-pour the  
foundation.

**Jeff:** I have a good friend who's an African-American who has lived here longer than I have... one night we  
were out and about and we decided to go to The Meanwhile.  
And we opened the door and he looked in and he just said "I can't do it."  
And I was like, "why not?" And he said,  
"I just, I just can't do it."  
And finally, later on, he confided, he said "partly it was that I used to come here when it was Two Stans,  
when it was a Black neighborhood bar, and now I don't see Black people coming here."

**Tami:** It's been really hard, like you said, the gentrification word gets brought up and I get that from all of  
my friends, like, "How do you feel about being part of the gentrification?" (laughs).  
And I say, I say I honestly don't feel like I'm part of that because  
I moved into a building that was just sitting here empty, it's not like somebody else was there... it is a  
Renaissance Zone

**Guy Bazzani:** There's been some comments that have been made that they're worried I'm going to buy the  
entire neighborhood and take over like some sort of dominant king. Which I had no capacity to do that, nor  
any intention to. But what our overall idea was, if we rebuild a building here on this corner that looks like  
every other building in the city that's done well in a good neighborhood, we think that this will send a signal  
that things are gonna change. And that it, it's a positive signal.

**Tami:** So what happened with the robbery was, it was in July 2008,  
I will never, ever forget that moment when the phone calls started coming in around 6 a.m. "What  
happened? What in the world happened?"  
and then I look online and see "One shot, three beaten at the Meanwhile Bar,"  
those horrible commenters online, ya know, like  
"they should just section that part of the city off" and  
"leave people to their own defenses, those animals" - things like that, that people were writing  
like "you deserve it," like "you deserve to get shot being in that neighborhood"  
everything from that to  
"well, you're gentrifying" and then after that we had just a lot of random people coming by and like  
neighborhood folks, black folks primarily, like spitting in front of our door  
saying threats under their breath as they walked by

## Lines Complete 7

it was a bad, bad time.

It is night and day (better now).

After we were robbed, that next night [the Business Alliance] –just like sent out the call for everyone to come down here, we had, oh, this place was packed from open to close with like everybody from the neighborhood just like supporting us, and a lot of black folks from the neighborhood came and said “we’re really sorry about what happened.” And then one of the kid’s dads came in here and apologized and so it was, it was just this wild, raw emotional experience.

**Jerry:** Now I’ve been in the same house for 20 years, uh, two blocks from here. Uh, 1 block from Sigsby School.

I watched the neighborhood turn over three times in terms of gentrification.

Move out again. Gentrification.

Now...see we, uh, we have more Caucasians on my block now than we ever have had in 20 years.

And it’s not a bad thing, but it’s not a good thing.

I’m there. I’m not moving.

I got a palace in the middle of the hood. I’ve been there 20 years. I got grass. I got a yard. It’s about principle.

**“Lisa Johnson”:** Can folks live wherever they want? Not in this town. I mean, you think you can. But you can’t. That’s an illusion in America. The American dream is not out there for everyone. I own a house now, in the city, a cheap one that I got from one of the foreclosures and I’m fixing it up myself, but the houses around it are just just....degrading. No one wants to live in a place where shit’s falling apart everywhere.

Home ownership was a big step for me because when I signed all that paper, I realized, I have a NAME. And it means something.

## EDUCATION

**Nancy:** And where you live, 95% of the time dictates your access to quality education. I mean, there are a few exceptions to that. But in general, where you live dictates where your children go to school.

**Jeff:** there’s been this sort of white flight  
people have taken their kids and set up shop  
in Forest Hills or East Grand Rapids or wherever else they’re living  
so that within the last 30-40 years, the student population in Grand Rapids Public Schools  
is now overwhelmingly African-American

**George Davis:** I think I was always conscious of my race  
it was something that my parents never hid from me  
particularly my mother  
she would, like, yell out the window  
“I love you, and Black is beautiful”  
as I was leaving for school

**Yamaka:** I was always taught that if you don’t show (your kids) more, they won’t know more.

## Lines Complete 7

**George Davis:** my neighborhood was very Caucasian, my church was very Caucasian, and I went to a very Caucasian school

I think around fourth grade my parents recognized that I would need an academic challenge which I wasn't getting at the public school, so they decided to send me back to Oakdale Christian, thinking I'd be afforded a lot more opportunities

**Yamaka:** So one of the places that we used to go to is Wealthy Park School. Well, it's a school, but they have a park there. And I would take my kids there and I would sit at a picnic table and they'd do their homework and play and I could keep them out of my hair.

**George Davis:** at Oakdale (Christian) I played sports, I was active, I was class president, I did everything there and they're like, "Aw, go Black boy! He's so cute! He knows everybody! He does everything! He has a good head on his shoulders! Great parents! He's black *and* he's in the CRC!" My father had very much the same experience my father grew up in Rockford from the time he was 5, he was one of two Black students who graduated from Rockford High School in 1975.

**Yamaka:** This one particular time we went (to Wealthy School) they were having a meeting, and I don't know if it was like the first day of school, but they had like whole pizzas, like they were just giving kids. I'm used to the cookies on the table, you get one and you keep going. So sometimes I brought a pizza to the park and we'll eat, and this one time we were sitting there, and there was some (white) kids who just stared, very hard.

**Linda:** Children *do* see color.  
'your skin looks very different than mine, your eyes look very different than mine'

**Yamaka:** And my daughter kinda smiled and said, "Mom, why are they looking at us like this?" "Just smile back and say, 'Hi.'" So, they was like, "Hi!" And as soon as they spoke the kids jumped and turned around. And so then I asked the parents – "Excuse me ma'am, um, how do you go about, is this like a scout thing or something like that?" "Oh, no. You have to live in this area to go to this school." "That's odd because I really do live in this area and we were looking of coming to this school." "Oh, I don't know, you'll have to call the school." And that was it. And it upset me because as an adult I've experienced it, but when my kids experienced it, their last words were, "Mom, I don't ever wanna go to this school."

**Tami:** I always said "I'm gonna send my child to public schools!" ya know, and everyone tells you that once you have a kid you'll do something different but I said that would never be true of me – sure enough, here comes time and I don't wanna do it and I have a real struggle with that, but at the same time I feel like I need to do whatever I can to be consistent to my values, but sometimes I may have to sway slightly so that's -- I'm gonna stay in the city (*laughs*) I'm definitely going to stay in the city, I'm not moving

## Lines Complete 7

so I've come to peace with it, but it's a big struggle

**Skot:** (We moved here) because we wanted our kids to be raised in an, in an environment that was, that was global. And the only place you can get that around here is in Kentwood schools. I mean, the school district has 56 different languages and 53 different nations represented. But even in the private schools our kids couldn't get that, that amount of exposure.

**Yamaka:** I send (my kids) to the Potter's House. The Christian school. It's a great place. I took them out of public schools because it started to get really bad. I know my daughter from September to December she had ten different teachers. And my son was the last straw. He got jumped, in first – no, kindergarten -- about, "Who are your people? Who's your gang?" And he was clueless and so because he didn't answer, they started hitting him.

**Erin Wilson:** Well, our kids are in GR Public, we know people that are frantically trying to get into the Schools of Choice or else they're going into the Christian school system. And it's not necessarily because they are really hell-bent on being in the Christian school system, I'm mis-phrasing there, but they think the Grand Rapids Public School system is a mess. And our confrontation with them is always you are not participating in changing the system. And so you can't say anything about the public schools, just don't talk about it, Because most of the -- I mean, primarily the friends that we have here are white, their kids are white, they probably would be ones that would do at least medium or better on testing -- and so by taking them outside of the district, it's kind of like they're not just escaping a problem, they're making it worse at the same time. So we'll be at parties where we'll have to stop talking about the public school system, because we're just strong believers in the fact that it's beyond the point where the superintendent is going to come in and save the day, this is going to come down to the schools themselves.

**Skot:** People want to mentally ascend to the concept of wanting diversity for their kids, but they don't, they don't want the work that diversity demands.

**Erin Wilson:** I have a mentally disabled 70-year-old neighbor who lives across the street who gets drunk and says I'm a fuckin' peckerwood every night. I'm like, peckerwood, where did that word come from? and just like "fuckin' honky" and "get out of his neighborhood," and everyone who lives around him tells him to shut up and everything short of apologizing for him, 'cause he's just – something bad happened to him. But him while I'm trying to eat outside with my family calling me a "fuckin' honky" is part of my reality, and stepping across, like, chicken bones on my way home and just dealing with neglect – houses that are shuddered and windows that are broken and dog crap in the alley. And that's all the bad stuff, and there's a bunch of good stuff, too, and Grand Rapids Public is a mix of good and bad -- and if it fails, we're to blame, that's the way we look at.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** You know, what is real teaching? You know, it's going back to relationships, right?

**Erin Wilson:** So, yeah, I think that part of being here is really being here. On any given day I'll walk outside and neighbors will come over and talk to me and wave, and I feel included and I feel like my house is safe, ya know. And we've had babysitters walk home at like 1 in the morning, and there's neighbors three houses down on their porch, and we're watching the babysitter walk away, and they'll say "don't worry about it, we got it, we're watching her, we're all here," and you just feel like...that's a great feeling.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** You can't, you can't learn from somebody that you can't trust. And, so if the teaching-learning situation is not a relationship one, then...it's just a kind of prison. And a lot of kids talk about school like prison because that's the prison guard there in front that's keeping you there, and then going to make you do things that you don't wanna do.

**Kristin:** There's so many issues at home. I mean and I'm not black, but, okay, I can put myself in the boat with some of the stuff. And growing up the way the way I did... You know, I know lots of kids like this of color, because there was so many grown-up things going on all around me and around them, they, they're not even allowed to be children.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** And you know, the kids in the Christian schools are so compliant. I taught them for nine years. I mean, they'll do whatever you say. You know, even if it's a dumb thing to do, they'll do it anyway because you told them to do it, you know? And, um, and that's the safety of feeling like everything's gonna be alright, you know? I trust my parents and I trust my school and everything's gonna be alright.

**Kristin:** I mean, I was throwin' chairs, and, and turnin' my desk over because I was a little person that had really big adult things thrown on me and God did not create children to deal with that kind of stuff. I didn't know how to, conflict resolution. I didn't know how to sort out my emotions. And so these kids, the same thing.

**George Heartwell:** So with 82% poverty in the Grand Rapids Public Schools -- that's students coming from homes that are eligible for free and reduced lunch, poverty households -- the issues that they bring to school with them are different from the issues that students . . . and are more expensive to address . . . than the issues that the students bring in Forest Hills.

**Skot:** You have kids raising kids. And what my mom always said is, she said, "Okay. So we can't get into contact with the kids, with the parents. Okay. So the, the need is still there. You have to help fill it. Okay, so that means that, so what do moms do? What do dads do when they're present?"

"Well, they wash their clothes."

"Okay. We're gonna get a bank of washers and dryers in the school. We're gonna wash their clothes."

"I wasn't trained to do that..."

"We're trained to affect the lives of young kids. Your job responsibility is broader than your job description."

**Linda:** Education, education, education,  
It has to be very intentional.

Studies show that in America your children will be racist unless you educate them otherwise  
if you choose silence and think that maybe by being colorblind it won't be passed to the next generation, all  
the studies show you're absolutely wrong

**George Davis:** (My parents) gave me the option, you can go to Christian High or you can go to Ottawa Hills  
and so I chose Ottawa, just because  
I think I was aware at that point that there was something that I was missing out on something that was  
very integral to the African-American experience that I wasn't getting  
(and my parents) saw a piece of who we were as Black kids dying by having been at Oakdale (Christian)  
for so long.

## Lines Complete 7

**Albert:** Well, our kids were mostly educated overseas we did send kids to Christian High here – if I had it to do over again, I wouldn't what we're learning (there) is our place in the privileged world, frankly, I mean just to be brutal about it, that's what I feel.

**George Heartwell:** If nothing else, there's the income difference that's required to be able to afford to send your kids to Christian schools, and because there are disparities in employment by race, people of color tend to be lower income and less likely to afford Christian schools. So when you see a child of color in a Christian school, your first . . . my first thought is, *There's an adopted kid*. Isn't it true? *That kid was adopted*. I'm an adoptive parent, so I say it lovingly.

**Albert:** My real fear about the Christian school system is that it's a system put in place in order to keep us isolated.

**George Heartwell:** Charter schools have created an additional inequality in that they are receiving public funds but functioning like private schools. And if you note where, not all, but most of them are located, they're in higher per capita districts right along the Grand Rapids line. So they're just into Forest Hills, where they can get the higher per capita reimbursement from the state, but where they're close enough to send the kids out of Grand Rapids where it's not so difficult for parents to get them to school.

**Victoria:** And so, when you said, "What's (Grand Rapids) like, educationally?" And I said, "It's a good place to raise your kids," I immediately realized that my filter is different than what it used to be because that was something I used to say um...for thirty, forty years. But now I'm starting to realize that I don't really believe that.

**George Davis:** And I think it wasn't until I went to high school at Ottawa Hills that I really realized that I was Black.

**Victoria:** Now I'm understanding that I cheated my kids as far as their education went, because I bought into the fact that the Christian school system was a good place for them to be. Um...they were taught by me to be color blind.

**Linda:** (It's) usually good-natured whites who say "well, I don't see color, I judge everybody exactly the same, I don't see color" and essentially what that's doing is wiping out someone's unique identity it's wiping out difference and saying "well, really the standard is white, and so I'm being charitable by seeing you as white" is essentially what it's saying (*laughs*)

**Victoria:** And now I look back on that and not helping (my sons) formulate who they were as African American males is to their detriment today as they enter their thirties. They didn't get anything in their educational process that said black people made a contribution to society. They simply didn't get it.

**George Davis:** It was a culture shock I'd come from such an extreme Caucasian background and to go to Ottawa Hills were it was



## Lines Complete 7

99.9% African-American students, or students of color  
and I had no idea how to deal with that

**Anonymous Woman 21:** A short time ago, just by chance, I ran into, um, a teacher at Ottawa Hills. And he started in about those kids and how they don't belong in school and there isn't anything you can do and you can't teach them. And he was going on and on. I was just really shocked. And I said, "I'm really surprised that you would talk this way," you know? And he said, "Well all the teachers agree. Um, I'm not by myself."

**George Davis:** and I would always get that from my friends at Oakdale and Christian High: "Oh, George, but you're not like the rest of them."

They would say, "Well, why do they act like that?"

I'm like, "Who are *they*? We're the same people."

"But no, you're different, you're not like them."

**Skot:** When the pronouns come in, stupidity walks right in.

**Victoria:** February, Black History month, I gather up all my ladies from the neighborhood and we cook greens and fried chicken and black eyed peas for the Wednesday night (church) group. And...probably three years into that, I said, *OK, I'm gonna start doin' something for the kids*. So I would make scripts for the kids to ah...do a narrative during um...the dinner. And that was when I started learning who Harriet Tubman was and who Sojourner Truth. I had no idea who these people were. No idea. And (the kids) would walk up on stage and read who they were, but I was learning with them.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** One of the things that I find interesting is that denial of racism and, and, I'm older, but certainly, um, one generation before me is, is very racist and two generations are unbelievably racist, you know, the things I grew up hearing.

So family is a big part of it.

And, um, of course media plays its part in, um, in portraying people of color either in a violent or sexual, um, roles. You know, and then the systemic part of it is if you can't get a decent education, part of that is related to teacher expectations, it's a huge part of that.

**Victoria:** I didn't know who Frederick Douglass was. I knew who Martin Luther King was...and who else? Jesse Jackson [*laughs*]. Kind of sick. I'm a product of the Christian Schools. And I thought Malcolm X was just really, really a bad guy, and that was the beginning, and I had to start really doing something about it.

**Randal:** I agree with this current superintendent that teachers need core, uh, core cultural competencies to teach in a city. But to me that's not just, uh, white teachers. That's all teachers. Because the teachers, by your nature, you, you're middle class. So if you were working with an urban youth who's tough and gotta be tough, you may not know how to respond to that because your values are, everybody is very nice.

**Laura:** My daughter, who is African, told me about her class. She said, "Mom, why is my teacher askin' us to write goals?"

"I'm assuming y'all probably have been acting crazy in class, so he's going to redirect. Maybe that might help you have some motivation to wanna learn."

She went to school, and the next day she said, "That's exactly what he said! But Mom, he said something I didn't like."

## Lines Complete 7

"What?"

"He said, 'You know what, I wanna help you guys be all that you can be 'cause I know you don't get any support at home, so I'm gonna be here to support you.'"

**Anonymous Woman 21:** We send (our college students) out there as aides and I've been part of that, and they sometimes say, you know, "This is the only place where the kids find love." And I'm like, "What?!"

**Laura:** I thought, *Well now, that's interesting because he's well-meaning, but he's clueless!* So I think the system in that way is jacked up.

**Yamaka:** I always hear, "We need you, we need teachers like you," and my dilemma is there are plenty of us out here but you're not hiring us. And if you look at these public schools, you might have two African-American teachers in the whole building. And that's what they were saying in the classroom.

"Oh my gosh, I've never worked with black kids before. I've never worked with these types of kids."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from the Upper Peninsula."

I'm like, "Wow, you just gotta have contact." That's what they do, they take them and put them here and it doesn't work and then they're saying, "Where have we gone wrong?"

**Linda:** I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, it was Italian, Irish, Mexican, and Native American and I never knew anybody that went to college.

My parents didn't go to college, um, which is kinda weird because both of my parents are really intelligent

**George Davis:** My presence in Oakland University was very much a culture shock to the African-American community there, because they didn't believe that Black people lived on the West side of the state.

All they know is there's just tons of Dutch people over there.

So I found myself placed in the same position as I was when I first came to Ottawa Hills, having to prove in some way myself as a Black person to Black people and you find the diversity that you feel within yourself very much in the larger community there

**Linda:** And so the idea of me going to college, ya know my folks talked about it because they wanted the best for me

but I just didn't have that model, and so I started with a few classes here and there and did okay so I kept going

I was just gonna – I thought I'd be the first one with a BA and I'd teach in the public schools or something like that, which is pretty cool for the neighborhood I came out of

and so I was just shooting for that, and I had a professor in one of my lit classes who came up and said "so, are you – do you have plans for graduate school?"

and I said, "well, no, I can barely pay for this, and I'm looking forward to gettin' a job and –"

and he said, "well, you should really look into getting a fellowship for graduate school"

and I mean I had to look at him and say, "what is that? What is a fellowship?"

I had never heard of a fellowship before.

**George Davis:** And I think it was at that time that I started to become aware of the idea of worldview and how important that is, personally, like I gotta get outta here, I gotta do something different, because I want my story to be different.

## Lines Complete 7

**Linda:** And he walked me through, he actually got me materials for fellowships and I got a fellowship where I could go anywhere in the world and they would completely pay for everything but that would never, ever have happened if someone didn't step into my life and say that. I mean, I knew in the abstract that these things existed, but I couldn't see the road enough in front of me to ever, ever go that way and so I'm so sympathetic with young people from communities of color around here with a working-class background.

**Albert:** there were a couple students we (helped) who had 4.0s or very high grade points, I think they went to Ottawa, and then they took the ACT or SAT, and they got a really low score. We were shocked, so that made us think, 'okay, so how is it possible for these kids to have such a high grade point at their high school and then do so poorly on their SAT? Is it that they don't know how to take that kind of test? Or is it that their school was just that much at a lower level, or what?' I mean, we don't know the answer.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** No Child Left Behind was supposed to take down lines. It added them. Like crazy. Now instead of having all these schools trying things, they're, we've labeled them 'failing.' So what do you do with that, you know? "My school is a failing school."

**Jeff:** I don't know if you're attending any of the meetings lately about public schools having more online classes, cutting the workforce of teachers and stuff but a lot of people in this community don't have access to computers there's still a huge digital divide, ya know? which there's sort of unwillingness to acknowledge I went to a bunch of those meetings, and was appalled at the attitude that the School Board took and that Superintendent Taylor took – particularly towards the student body in the 25 years I've been here, I've never seen parents and the student body so enraged and organized around a single issue of school politics as I have around this I mean, when they had to move meetings to Ottawa Hills because they had 5, 6 hundred show up to the School Board meeting, I mean, that's unprecedented and then to pretty much basically, even though virtually everyone there was on the same page about what they wanted, to have them basically say "we don't give a shit what you think, we're still going to do what we need to do because we think we know what's in the best interest of this school system" is like (*I think he probably shrugged and threw his hands up in the air here*)

**Nancy:** So it's not just the books and the blackboards and the supplies,

**Linda:** when you have school financing laws based on property taxes, and so you have school districts that can pump money and money and money and resources and resources and resources into some schools and not others

**Anonymous Woman 21:** Money, you know, it all feeds each other. You can't get money without education. You can't, um, get an education without money.

**Linda:** So if you have a two-parent, two-income home, those kids are gonna get better education all the way.

## Lines Complete 7

**Nancy:** So it's that ripple effect. Just having them be exposed to people, um, with higher income, people with more opportunities.

**AW 21:** And I consider competition to be our biggest problem. We think schooling is about competition. Where's that come from?

**Nancy:** You can triple the amount per student and you have barely any increase in their performance in school. But you have them sit next to, you know, you de-concentrate, um, poverty and you de-concentrate race and the performance shoots up.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** Why isn't schooling about community? Helping each other. Our students would be better if they'd have been brought up, instead of individualistic achievement, credentialing, what if they were brought up to help each other? To make sure that everyone succeeds around you?

**Nancy:** How do you deem success? Success is no kids brought guns today? Or success is, you know, we had this many kids get into college?

**Linda:** When (a colleague) wrote his book, he puts a monetary value, a very conservative one, on what he thinks the value of slave labor was in the United States and then he talks about giving that back in educational programs paying for education, which would solve I don't know how many social problems

**Anonymous Woman 21:** There's more young black males in prison than in schools in New York City. Is it true in Michigan, too? Yeah—you've heard the statistics obviously about how much it costs, right? Like 50,000 dollars a year to have somebody in prison. And you could go to the best college in the country.

**Linda:** and I said, "so you're really talking about reparation in the form of educational programs" which I'm, ya know, totally for and he said, "oh NO, NO, NO – not reparations" and so now I call it "the R word" (*laughs*) because you can't even say that but in my thinking, that would be one important step towards economic justice in this country.

**George Heartwell:** There are two systems of education—one system is educating children to be governors and another is educating children to be governed, and it's not coincidental that the one is all white and the other is black or all minority.

**Linda:** and so when you talk about wealth in America being 80% inherited, we have completely shut out a class of people and it's like, wait a minute – we do reparations with World War II victims, why can we not even say the word here? and then, ya know, one of the narratives in America is that America is this great country because we had all these natural resources and then we built this wonderful country and I just want to say "wait a minute – those resources you're talking about were stolen from Native Americans

## Lines Complete 7

and the labor to build this wonderful country  
was stolen also”

America’s great because they got free labor and free land  
and let me tell you, if a country can’t make it with free labor and free land, if they can’t become great on  
that, then that’s a sorry story  
and yet– we just say ‘that was a long time ago, it doesn’t have any effect today’  
of course it has an effect today, and it will continue for many generations, unless there is  
some kind of an intervention  
a cultural intervention

### **CLASS/JOB/ECONOMICS/WEALTH/WHITE PRIVILEGE**

**Jerry:** I have a set of twins that go to the number four university in all the United States. They go to Emory University in Atlanta, full scholarship. They’re gonna graduate summa cum laude, okay.

However, when they come back to visit Grand Rapids, they notice the lines of how this line is overt poverty and this line looks like Pleasantville.

This line is modern houses. This line is colonial style houses.

Broken down. Postmodern, eclectic.

Illiteracy, PhDs.

Separated by a line.

The expectation is, don’t cross the line. Don’t you dare think about crossing that line.

**Albert:** It’s hard to admit that the American Dream is false

and that there isn’t a level playing field

and that has economic implications.

I think the American Dream has degenerated.

It has become ‘anyone can make it in America’

rather than ‘this is a dream about what America – what we all can be as a society’

and that ends up, then, punishing the poor, who are disproportionately people of color.

**Tami:** I was a social worker for about 10 years, and my focus was on homelessness

and I remember my first few days in the office at Salvation Army

and I was a 23-year-old, just out of college, I was

shocked – and I apologize for not having the statistics – but the amount of black folks as opposed to white folks coming in was absolutely astounding,

it was well into the 70, 80, 90% of people coming in

there were always more black folks in the programs aimed at anybody in poverty

**Albert:** I think racism is economically motivated.

We are racist because it puts money in our pockets.

That’s why we had slaves, that’s why we had the free land from the Native Americans – just take it over.

And we had justifications, rationalizations for doing all of that

## Lines Complete 7

**Tami:** and then there I was  
and I'm trying to tell these middle-aged black women  
with children what they need to do to get on the right track.  
Looking back, it was just absurd.

When what these folks were dealing with was wages not keeping up with housing prices,  
and, ya know, the slashing of subsidies in the 80s and 90s (*laughs*)

**Albert:** Okay, so this is really a big thing for me  
the whole Bill Cosby thing of saying, "Okay, us black people, we need to get our act together – we no  
longer value education, and all the weaknesses in family structures"  
and I hear people who say "you just have to stop blaming whitey for everything"  
and, ya know, "you're not a victim!"  
So Obama gets elected and says, "This proves that anyone can make it in America"  
and so there's that whole message that's going to the African-American community  
that a lot of the problems are self-inflicted, so stop blaming other people and get your act together  
then there's the other extreme position of saying  
no, it really is the problem of white people, and white racist society, and racism  
and so I see white people and black people  
struggling to understand what's really real  
and I think it's because both are real at the same time

**Tami:** I mean I was happy to have a job, it was amazing to try to help people, ya know, but at the same  
time...  
I saw homelessness as an economic issue not as a behavioral issue  
I mean it was behavior for 5, 10% of folks it was severe addictions, severe mental health issues, but for the  
90% it was strictly economic

**Anonymous Woman 22:** I don't think I'm doing something bad. I think I'm raising a kid.  
Because you can do one or two things: you can raise your kids, or you can work hard and you don't see  
your kids raising, how they raising.  
I saw my kids just turn different when you, when you don't put too much attention to them.  
I think there's nothing wrong, with me as a mom, alone. I think I'm trying to make it, a little bit at time. And  
yes, yes, sometimes it does feel like something's standing in my way.  
If that is the, um, color of my skin or hair, my being immigrant? I don't know.

**Tami:** They needed money for rent, that's what they needed.  
I had clients who were working full-time at McDonald's or wherever  
and the amount they made was not enough to pay for their rent and utilities.

**Anonymous Woman 22:** And I went to apply for, uh, cash assistance and I was, I think at that time I still  
was working in McDonald's for and I make like 80 dollars every two weeks.

## Lines Complete 7

And I let her know that I have only that, that income and she told me that, the social worker, she told me that was a lot of money so she cannot help me.

So, 80 dollars, I told her. "Do you think 80 dollars will be a good, enough money to survive?"

**Bing Goei:** And the idea that in this country you can do anything you want because you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and all that sort of thing.

What became clear to me is that

this is not a country where everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps

simply because many people don't get boots

and sometimes we give people boots but we don't give them the straps

and we intentionally do that, it isn't just by accident

(and sometimes we only do that to make us feel good)

'oh, we gave you boots'

but we forget to give them the straps to pull them up with (laughs)

you know what I mean?

**Tami:** White folks have just historically had more generations to accumulate wealth

so we come to a place where we just have access

not everyone, of course, but in general

white people have access to a little bit more wealth and a little bit more property, which

in this country, equates to a certain amount of power

definitely the power to hire a good lawyer or get into a little bit safer neighborhood

so definitely the wealth and then

just, I mean let's face it, white folks still kinda run things.

**Anonymous Woman 21:** I encountered a graduate student who said to me, "I, I've gone through all of this university and I've never heard of white privilege and I don't believe in it." I had her read Tim Wise. Boy did that make her mad.

She said, "I don't believe it exists." And she gave me this example. She said, if, I mean, you're not gonna believe this.

She said, "If two men went to get a job as, as broadcasters, one was black and one was white, and then, um, the white one was learning disabled and couldn't talk, who would get the job?"

And I said, "Well you would have to start with both of them being equally qualified."

"Well, then, then white privilege isn't true."

A refusal to think logically.

**Randal:** It's a white town. Grand Rapids is a white town. I don't care what anybody says.

I mean, it's just, whiteness is, it's just like...

Thick. And I'm using that in a, in a sociological descriptive.

It's just thick.

And people don't think that, they don't think in those terms.

It really affects how we treat people.

## Lines Complete 7

**Rick Wilson:** That's essentially where the culture is right now which you hear white people say, "I don't see color. I just see people."

Well, that's not true. You do see color, ya know?

And the other thing too that I hear all the time is, "Well, we just gotta get over this."

And the question I tried to confront people with, "Exactly what are you saying we need to get over? But unless you can define that, we can't, um, because we don't understand our history.

We try to ignore it and it causes much pain and suffering. Sometimes some ridiculous situations.

**George Davis:** For instance, I was in the locker room the other day, just getting done with spin class and a faculty member, walks in, and he's like

"Hey, Kenneth! How was class today? You might not know me, but by the way, I'm Phil."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Maybe you have me confused – my name is George Davis"

"Oh, right, you work in Student Life, right?"

"No, I work in Admissions"

"Oh, well that's great – so are you the one who coordinates the programs for multi-cultural and minority students?"

"Actually, no"

And I was like, dude, BACK THE TRAIN UP, like when you realized at first that you were mistaken, why didn't you just stop and introduce yourself. I obviously got your name wrong – what's your name?"

so you inferred that I was someone else, and not only that, then you tried to

guess which department I worked for

it's like, dude, take the foot out of your--

just, give up the shovel and just ask

like, what's the harm in asking

(and things like that happen) all too frequently

I have been Ralph, Kenneth, Michael, Raphael

and I had locks, dreadlocks, I had long hair

even when I had long hair people called me Raphael, I said "Raphael has no hair!"

there's literally, on one hand, there's that many staff members at my college

men of color

there's no reason to get us confused.

**Sonya Hughes:** I think my skin color affects all my decisions on how I live. Where I buy a house, will I be safe there, will I be accepted, and fortunately, I am. But I've lived in environments in Grand Rapids where that has not been the case. Where I've walked out to go to my car in the morning and had racial epithets yelled out the windows. Ah, garbage lined on top of my car, um, that-that is a stressful way to start your day, stressful way to end your day. So when I come to work, I have that as well, intentional or unintentional, whether it's clients, coworkers, the general public, it's constantly laid on top of that. And it-it might feel like a microinequity. Something very small that, slight that's maybe unintentional, but it has a big impact when that's a constant erosion that's occurring.

**Rick Wilson:** You know, the typical response is, "Well, I never owned a slave. I didn't participate in colonialism, so I'm not responsible."

But the reality is race is a social construct.

And because it is in peoples' hearts and minds, it drives policy. It drives history. It drives our behaviors.



## Lines Complete 7

**Sonya:** I-I've had uh, an employer from my past come into my office and tell me I have a-a her words were that I have a phone voice that benefits, because people cannot tell by my voice the color of my skin on the phone and that was to my benefit. And this person thought they were giving me a compliment.

**Tia:** One situation where I can think of for me personally is, um, coming in to work and starting a job. And you know, and it's hard for me to talk about it just because I honestly, I don't wanna feel that's the reason, you know? I mean, cause like I said, I think we use it as an excuse, you know?

Um, but coming in, you know, I'm making a certain amount of money.

Someone else comes in. Female, both female.

Caucasian comes in. Same coordinator position. Entry level.

Making a dollar and something more than I do.

Same experience. Same education.

I mean...what else could I...? You know?

**George Heartwell:** ...So you are more likely today to see people of color in important positions in business and banking and in law firms than you were even a decade or so ago. That's clearly progress. If you look . . . where you'll see the marked difference, I think, (you might want to test this out) . . . when you look at boards of banks and major corporations, that at the level of governance it's still pretty white, in fact it's pretty white male, still.

**Carlos Hidalgo:** It was here that I saw it unvarnished.

I was CEO of a large company here in town. And, and very much in the mainstream.

There was already a large company like mine here in town. One of *the* big ones that I had been trying to get into. And...finally I get a phone call.

"These two managers would like to meet with you. There's a project that they'd like to discuss with you."

So I put on my pin striped suit and the power tie and the white shirt and my New York subway cufflinks.

So we, so they introduce themselves. They were both sitting at a long table.

So they asked me, uh, they have a project. They'd like to know more about my company and things I have done.

And I have a portfolio, show them all the things I've done for Fortune 500 companies.

And about 10 minutes into it this fellow stops me and says, "Did you really do that?" I was confused. I said, I was, I was a, I guess naïve...

I said, "Of course I did that. "

He said, "Well look. Stop. Stop right there. We have a major government contract coming in and we need someone who's a minority to participate. That's part of the contract. So that's why you're here."

I stopped. I closed my presentation. I began to put it...

The guy said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "Well, I'm not your token spic. You'll have to find somebody else."

And I left.

Years later I was able to share that story with the CEO of the company which is a publicly traded company, and he could not believe it.

I said, "Believe it, because it happened right here in your company."

## Lines Complete 7

And you know what, it has to start with the individual, because it's a matter of the heart. Um, but it also has to start with the CEO that says, "No more."

**Rick:** We have laws on the books that are supposed to take care of that, but in actual practice because peoples' hearts don't change, we're not doing well at it.

We have never been taught about the economic engine that was slavery and still is to this day because the same relational dynamics are with us.

**Sonya:** Ah, being in the elevator and this has happened multiple times, especially in parking ramps, individuals will actually reach out and touch my hair, "Oh it's just so interesting, I just had to touch it." As if that's okay. Complete strangers, some I'm not even engaged with a hello in the elevator, you're standing there when all of a sudden someone has reached out and touched your hair. There are so many messages around that. One, they thought they had the right to do it, one, I'm an object of interest, total disrespect, and it's just ignorance, and it's those things-

**Rick:** And that's how race and class essentially almost cooperate with one another.

**Laura:** I think that you can learn how to survive in Grand Rapids as a poor black person, especially if you are a poor black person with some personality. You can survive because people wanna help you. And then you nice on top of that, and you Christian, and you can sing, and you love Jesus. They really want to help you. The place I've had to come through over the years is you don't need somebody to hold you up every step of the way—you can start to stand up. You don't just go to people, especially white people who you think it looks like they have everything for help. And I think we have this paternalistic theme...it's created this really funky dance that we do—the white folks and people of color . . . that white folks and poor people of color do really well. Really well.

**Marcus:** But I got a problem with us, OK? [Laughs]

Um...I've noticed that, when I'm around my relatives—mother, brother, cousin, aunts, um, even just people I know—and we are in a setting that requires that they interact with white people...now, follow me here because...you following me?

OK. What I've found is that there's sort of an unspoken...sort of shuck 'n' jive that blacks do in this town because... [laughs] it's sort of hard to describe because you almost have to see it.

**Laura:** African Americans who have come here from other metropolitan cities say that black folks in this city have a plantation mentality. Basically we have this . . . "We can't do nothin' without white folks. We can't do nothin' against our white folks, and we certainly can't do nothin' on our own. So that's why we have the dynamic we have.

**Marcus:** My mom does it a lot. I was at the hospital with my mom the other day, OK? And I'm kind of a nutt—I like making people laugh, you know what I'm sayin'? And so my nephew's getting some work done on his throat and there's a nurse that's there and I'm jokin' with her about whatever, and my mom apologizes for me as if I've done something wrong because I decided to have a sense of humor with a white person. And my mom says, "Oh, don't mind him, he's an actor." [Laughs] And she puts on this voice,

## Lines Complete 7

that's not...it's not her...this super sweet polite shit that is obviously designed to make somebody really like you. And I can see that this woman is lookin' at her like, "You don't have to do all that."

**Laura:** I would listen to my mother on the phone when she talked to businesses, how she would change and speak very proper English. And I even asked my daughter that last week, I said, "Can you tell when I'm talking to white people on the phone?" She said, "You change the way you talk. You change the way you speak."

**"Lisa Johnson":** You can't escape from it if you're black you know? I spent three years trying to escape from it. Trying to deny it. Working against all odds to pretend that it wasn't an issue in my life, trying to be white I guess you could call it...to live white privilege as a black woman. Yeah, right. Who was I kidding? That's the reality of what I gotta deal with every day. I gotta, often enough, hide who I am. Cover up. Learn to talk white because things just don't happen for you unless you learn, through practice and education to sound and act white.

**Austin:** I see (my neighbor) Bobby, who is 15, really bright, and an entrepreneur but has kind of chosen to not elevate his speech his older brothers speak, can speak very polished, professional English so there's a big element of agency, of choice, in that linguistic decision speaking more of a polish—white, we might call it or King's English more – I don't know how to call it – precise, maybe? Or whatever, whatever loaded word you wanna use white but I don't think it's necessarily white look at an Indian-American speaks with what I would call that language, and they're not white so...is it British? Is that maybe what it is?

**"Lisa Johnson":** I think it's because I'm so dark that I feel some of what I feel. If I was even a little bit lighter skinned, I might feel differently. But I was born black as night and so that has put me into this category where people just don't trust me. They see me coming, and I'm a tall woman too (6'1') And folks just get scared. I'm not really sure why, but they do. In my opinion, white folks are scared of black folks. That's a main reason why there's so much segregation around us. It's bounded up in fear.

**Janice:** I was at an anti-racism training thing and a black man said to me, "stop talking to me!" He really thought I had an arrogant attitude and I was um, just trying to be a friendly white lady and it was really annoying to him. And at first I thought he was kidding me, and then I realized he was very serious and he was really angry---like just, "stop talking to me, I don't want to have any conversation with you." And boy, that thing threw me for a loop that I could be so detestable to him, and I had to really think that through. And umm, and realize that...this is what racism has done to us, even though I might think we're there in order to get to know each other, I've no idea what his experience is. We've been separated for so long, that um, sometimes we just can't talk.

## Lines Complete 7

**Jeff:** there are a lot of liberals in this community who pay lip-service to this idea of racial equality and racial justice but when push comes to shove are unwilling to sort of say, these folks in power are the problem – they're the root of the problems, ya know for them, the idea is just if you adopt some friends with, ya know, different skin tone and have them over for dinner then, then, that's good, that's enough and I just think that's total absurdity

**Anonymous Woman 1:** I can remember overhearing a conversation between my parents about a guy my dad called a "negro" and my dad being real upset about how this guy had gotten a job at the factory over another white guy and my dad was just furious because he said it was wrong. And then he would tell us that we were very lucky to be living where we were living and going to school where we were and going to church where we were. I had no sense, really, of anything outside of East GR and I think a lot of people, especially kids there, are like that. Like this total sense of enclosure I guess. I didn't really think about it or come into contact with race stuff, with people different from me, until I went to college.

**Jeff Smith:** And to me there's a qualitative difference (between personal and systemic racism) because when we get bogged down in talking about my own personal attitudes and beliefs about it then it makes it sound like whatever the larger problems are, then it's like it's my fault or whatever, and I think that's just ridiculous. I have had no say in, personally, even as a white male, I've had no say in economic and political structures in this town. I think it's more honest to say what we have is a system of white supremacy, it's not a system of racism.

**Anonymous Woman 1:** I think that we do need to address white privilege, but I don't know how. I don't know where to start. I feel like a kind of, what is it, a kind of apathy? It's like you can't make any kind of a dent in the system, so it feels like not trying. What I am supposed to do?

**Laura:** I think there's something to race and class that plays a big part in this city. There's a lot of well-meaning, big-hearted white people here. So like even the way I got my car from the nice Dutch guy that owns a car dealership, and he's helping me out. And even as I get this car, I'm thinkin', *Man, am I perpetuating this thing right now? I really need a car. This man is going to help me. OK. But how do I maintain my self-respect, and how do we have a relationship that doesn't create this dynamic where I'm beholden to him?*

**Lisa Johnson:** Government cheese government cheese. What I tell people all the time is that we have to stop taking handouts and instead, we have to do what is right. We have to work hard, we have to make our way. Guy I had worked with years and years who just could not see past the end of his own junk. He was involved in drugs, with gangs...the stereotype. So he, so I keep on after him because I knew he had a mind, that he could make it.

## Lines Complete 7

But so he gets picked up for over the limit on marijuana. Now he's in and I go down and get him out and help him fight the system, but only on this one condition that he would get help, and I mean real help. We got him into a mentoring program run by this guy in the city, Jerry Bishop, you know him? He holds men, boys accountable for who they are. He's the kind of mentor we need everywhere. You know, where are the male mentors who can really offer something to these guys and show them a different way? Yeah, so he got involved in that program over there with Jerry and he's a changed man...changed. Got a decent job, then he got married and got a house through Habitat. Changed.

**Skot:** I had a mentor that looked to me. He was well meaning, great man.

And he said, "Skot. If you're not Dutch, you're not much."

And I felt those words hit me.

That comment is just, you might as well just say nigger to somebody.

Because it's the same thing. And you know, even if you're white, you're not necessarily Dutch.

It's a toxic comment is what it is.

They say it in jest and they don't really even see it unless you check 'em and say, "You know? Here's how this sounds."

And they're like, "Oh my word. I didn't, I didn't know that."

### **A voice is heard – asks three questions from the stepping exercise**

**George Heartwell:** I resisted the institutes for healing racism for a long time. I said, "I'm already very sensitized, thank you. I don't need this." But I finally did, and it really sort of cracked me open in a way that surprised me. I think typically towards the end, maybe the last session, is the experience of all lining up against the wall and taking a step forward if you can answer the questions affirmatively.

### **The voice asks one more question**

**George Heartwell:** After a dozen or so questions, realizing that all of us white folks are out here, and all these classmates that we've got to know or maybe even knew before we came in are way back there, a step or two out from the wall, and we're halfway across the room. What a powerful experience that was . . . it was sort of an instant . . . I wept.

By the middle of the exercise, which felt interminable, my black colleague had tears on her face and I was thinking about like really reflecting on how I treated her. All the invisible lines, the color lines that we draw without even realizing it.

## **RELIGION**

**Jerry Bishop:** Um, I wasn't looking to be a pastor. Uh, I was minding my own business, But I got tired of seeing so many young men of color fail and die because the church wasn't reaching out to them and neither was the community.

I think there are some great ministries in West Michigan that are attempting diversity They're attempting diversity. You know, the grade is still an incomplete.

## Lines Complete 7

**Kevin Morales:** I think when you go to church, you really wanna be comfortable. You wanna feel, you know, free to worship in your own way. And... people just wanna feel... like they're at home when they're at church, and at home, you're usually surrounded by people that look like you.

**Carlos Hidalgo:** And you know, you mentioned something about, about, about, um, Sunday being the most racially segregated time in America.  
I don't know, I don't know that it is by choice.

**Laura Carpenter:** I have had people say to me, people of color, "Monday through Saturday, I have to deal with white people, and I have to deal with dealing with white people. Sunday I'm going to go be with people who get me, and I don't have to deal with this mess at least one day of the week. I'm not dealin' with it."

**Janice:** If you look at how the church developed in the United States um, early on, um slaves were asked to become Christian but they weren't invited into the congregation. So separation began early on. So I think about African American congregations and how they were places of rejuvenation and survival and umm, I understand why African Americans would like to stay in their own congregations.

**Linda:** And because people want church to be a place where they feel completely comfortable, churches will not be multicultural.

There's nothing comfortable about multiculturalism  
it's tense,

but people think of church as that comfortable, feel-good space  
and I never have, because I've never been comfortable

I see the church as my family: totally dysfunctional, but you can't divorce your siblings.

**George Heartwell:** One of the best integrated worship experiences that I've ever had, and it was over fourteen years, was at Heartside Ministry, where black and Hispanic and white people were worshiping together. And what they had in common was their experience of poverty.

**Albert:** and that kind of thing can make  
that all makes the whole divisions and the issues that much more complicated, so it's hard to figure out  
what in there is about race, and what is about other stuff

I think, probably impossible to really isolate, because it's all mixed up

I think it's a huge and evolving issue, but there's almost no one

who can talk about this

that's how I feel

in society in general and in church, it's almost impossible to bring up the subject

Politically, are you kidding? You can't get anywhere.

You can't even say the word race.

**Victoria Gibbs:** Just recently we had an elders meeting and um...the conversation went to race. And it's the first time it had ever happened, because we just don't talk about it because we're all one in Christ, and we're all forgiven, and Jesus loves us all.

We won't name it. We'll suffer in silence, but we won't name it. For forty-five minutes were sitting talking about how does the church engage with the community—not a word is said about race. I just said, "OK, what part does race play with this?" And one of the guys had to stop the conversation and choke back the

## Lines Complete 7

tears in order to proceed. We would sat there the whole time, taking notes, planning events, planning strategies. That's sick. And if the leaders don't have [this kind of open honest dialogue], how can we expect people in the church to have it?

**Albert:** I just feel like we're useless  
we're part of the problem, not the solution, and it just stinks  
and I'm sitting here... I'm part of the  
gosh, I'm part of the power structure, so that really is hard for me  
I have a lot of mixed feelings all the time  
I'm not sure if I was a young person today if I'd stay in the CRC  
and I'm a CRC minister  
but then again I don't know that there'd be a better place to go to.

**Skot:** We think it's normal to worship separately.  
We, we think that it's normal. And it isn't.  
And so that's where you see manifestations of institutionalized racism.  
Look at most of the churches. You've got a white, a picture of a white Jesus.  
And my question is is, if he was white, how could Mary and Joseph take him and hide him in Egypt?  
You can't hide a blonde haired blue-eyed kid in Egypt, because that's a black nation.  
But he was a person of color. [Don't make him who he isn't.]  
And so that's the institutionalization of racism.  
Jesus didn't have problems with the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the real folk.  
He had a problem with the religious community because the religious community refused to change.

**Laura:** So we're so proud of the fact that our churches are integrating on Sunday morning, but are we really community? So we're all in the same building, and we might sit next to each other, but is there community? And I would venture a guess -- no. I'm not gonna go sit in the space with white folks, who after I tell my story, they wanna, you know, pat me on the back. No, I need somebody, when I say, "You know what, my brother is in prison doing ten, twenty," she's gonna say, "You know what, my son just got locked up again, too, girl. Let's pray for each other." Can't neither one of us really help each other but to pray for each other.

**Guy Bazzani:** I think people just have to uh, get comfortable with mixed races. It's such an easier said than done, people don't get each other, they don't know when to smile or not smile, you know what I mean? It's just a funny barrier and there's so much -- television supports all of it, you know.

## JUSTICE

**Jeff:** I don't think that the (news organizations are) sitting around crafting in meetings, "How do we make Black people look more criminal?"  
but because they work within this institutional framework, that's the outcome of how they do news because a disproportionate representation of crime suspects in news coverage are Black and Latino  
even though crime statistics for Grand Rapids do not reflect that that's the case  
just as it's not the case in the country  
we know that 80% of drug users in this country are white

## Lines Complete 7

but that's not the perception that people would have  
because we don't see stories about those folks

**Guy Bazzani:** You see a little graffiti in town and everybody assumes it's a bad African American neighborhood. Everybody we caught doing graffiti on our buildings, everybody we caught was from East Grand Rapids or Christian High. Everybody. Damaging the building, doing uh, graffiti inside and outside, every person was upper middle class white. I had some very prominent folks from, parents from East Grand Rapids calling me begging me not to prosecute.

**Austin:** so December 23<sup>rd</sup> I went shopping for food for a friend's Christmas party  
in the afternoon  
and I came back and my back door had been – the glass pane had been shattered  
and my guitar was in the door  
and when I first stood there, I was like 'oh my god, did I leave my—'  
ya know, like, the crazy thoughts that go through your brain when you see something like that  
and then I immediately realized that

**Austin and Anonymous Woman 2:**  
my house had been broken into

**Anonymous Woman 2:** And I just kept thinking....please, please, please don't let this guy be a black guy, be a person of color. Because I'm a professor and I do a lot of anti-racism work in my classes and I ask students to do this honesty exercise about race, where they have to close their eyes and picture who's breaking into their car, who's breaking into their home, who's stealing their bicycle. And it's about 99.9% of my white students who see a black guy committing the crime.

**Austin:** the whole thing made me feel just sort of like  
and this is so not appropriate  
but I felt maybe like how a woman feels like after a rape, like I wasn't supposed to talk about it  
it was my fault  
I had done something to invite this robbery  
I was white and rich and I left my blinds up, which I had  
so someone could just look in and see my shit  
and probably know that this house was good enough to break into  
and 54 houses had been broken into in 45 days in Grand Rapids, so I wasn't alone

**Anonymous Woman 2:** And then they caught the person. Young black kid. 17 years old. I was so disappointed because I was SO trying to change my mind about how I felt about who commits crimes. It just made me sad and I just...well, I just didn't know what to do.

**Austin:** I just felt compelled to talk with other people who had been a part of this wave  
especially in the neighborhood  
so I ended up speaking to this fellow who lives on Sherman  
one block over  
and his home had been broken into 3 times in the space of like a month and a half  
his response was "I've been thinking about getting a gun"



## Lines Complete 7

and sometimes I think maybe I should sit in my son's room with a gun, in a rocking chair and just wait" and I totally related to that because once it happened, it was like "what do I do? Do I buy a gun?"

**Sharon:** Like on the one hand, I wanna say [Grand Rapids is] a fairly safe place, but then on the other hand, I think again, race shapes that.

So it's like, I might be able to say it's a safe place to live, but I'm not walking around with this skin color that adds a whole other level of complexity to my safety.

**Jeff Smith:** back in 2002 or 2003

there was an African-American couple somewhere near Fuller and Fulton and they were accosted by two young white guys who used, ya know, racial slurs and physically abused the man and the news stations went berserk, for days that's all we heard about they wanted to know what I thought, personally, about this assault and I was like, "what the hell are you asking me that for?" and so I said, "while I think the incident itself is deplorable to me the bigger problem is that this country, this community, is entrenched in sort of systemic racial injustice and you guys don't ever report on that stuff institutional racism or bank loans or redlining or housing dynamics or employment issues discrimination, I've never seen that kind of stuff this is an easy story to do, and I'm not saying you shouldn't report this kind of stuff but (it's) just the tip of the iceberg so I think it makes all of us, particularly in the white community, feel like 'oh, I don't engage in that kind of behavior, therefore I must I must be a good guy, I care about these people because I would never assault somebody like that or I would never call them names' yet they might engage in practices, willingly or unwillingly, that are doing way worse damage because they prevent people from getting loans or jobs or advancing in careers

**Sharon LaChappelle:** You look around, like I work at Baxter (Community Center), I see people dealing with unbelievable, um, pain and suffering and it has to do with the systems that are in place and the laws that are in place.

**Anonymous Woman 1:** I saw this boy, black boy, probably around 17 or 18 years old, driving right over here on Alger Street and I was just walking my dog and minding my own business and right at this corner, two cop cars just block this kid and make him stop driving. They basically tell him to get out of the car and put his hands up and I was really scared because I wasn't sure at all what was going on.

**Antonio:** Psh. I'm used to it now.  
Like, I want them to stop me.  
It's like, it's like I have bets with my friends like,  
Man I bet they stop us.  
And then they do.  
It's like, it's just the way it is.  
Like, I just know when they're gonna stop me.

**Anonymous Woman 1:** They pushed him down on the ground and the one white cop like put his foot on the kid's head and I had no idea why at all but I kept watching from some distance back. They frisked the kid down on the ground and I saw that other white cop actually kick the kid in the ribs. And they cuffed him and sort of threw him in the back of the police vehicle and I distinctly heard the N-word used toward that boy and I was so shocked that I didn't get license plates or anything.

**Antonio:** I know I've never committed a crime, so it's like...  
I'm not, I'm not afraid. Not afraid of that. I'm not afraid of the police. No.  
It's just, I hate it when they do that because it's like,  
I thought they was only supposed to stop people if they see things out of order.  
But, but last time they stopped us, it was like a week ago  
There's construction on our street.  
So, it's just me and four other of my, of my friends  
And when we by the corner,  
The police just swarm up on us. It's like two, three cars.  
And everybody's silent. And I've never been the silent type.  
And I was like, "Why are we bein' stopped? We're just walkin' down the street."  
He's like, "You guys are in the street. We were just lookin' out for your safety."  
Like, "There's no cars gonna be comin' down this street. It's a construction zone."  
So it's like, they put me in the back seat and just like  
Ran my name.  
And he thought I was lying about my name for some reason  
Because he couldn't find my name in the system.  
I'm like, "You're not gonna find my name in the system. 'Cause I'm not in the system."

**Anonymous Woman 1:** But I did call to make a complaint and they had me come in and fill out some paperwork and I tried to make a difference there, but I didn't know what else to do. What do you do? I didn't know. I'm just this 30-something white woman with what I feel like is no power in a situation like that. I mean, do you walk up to them and say it like it is? And then I never followed up on the paperwork or anything for about three months, but I called in later because it was still bothering me. They said that the case was "under review." That's all. I'm still upset about it, but I don't know what to do. Feels worse than ever that I'm moving.

**Antonio:** I guess that's how they clean up the neighborhood. Run up on random people.

**Sharon:** Let's just say you were a young man that grew up in Jenison and then you maybe moved to Grand Rapids and you got on the police department.  
You may have a really good heart, but, what you come at the job with is a perception of people of color that's a little bit warped, and so even though you might be coming with the best heart,  
Like, like *I wanna improve things in this city*, um, your judgment might be really biased.

**Yamaka:** I had to be like 21, 22. I gave my best friend a birthday party and there is about ten of us in my house, all young and all African-Americans. Somehow during the party the police came and banged on the door really, really hard, to the point where I thought they were gonna knock it down. I opened up the door and two white officers were standing there and I was like, "How can I help you?"

## Lines Complete 7

And they were like, "We got some complaints about your music." And I was like, "That's odd because our music wasn't playing but I understand, sir." And he said, "who lives here?" and my husband, he was like, "I live here and my wife and my daughter." He was like, "Well you ought to be happy she isn't here because uh we would have took her somewhere, we would have took her," or something like that. And that's what started the whole thing. My husband was like, "Why would you say that? Why would you do that? What did we do?" And at this point (the cop) was like, "I just need one person to talk to." So I had on my house shoes and as soon as I stepped into the hallway he grabbed me, turned me around and handcuffed me. You see these marks right here. They come from the handcuffs. I have had them ever since. Never, never been arrested my entire life. So he grabbed me and my husband was like, "what did she do? You said you were just gonna talk to her" and he was like, "Shut your ass up and get your black ass back into the house or I am going to arrest you, too."

I said, "Please, loosen these handcuffs, sir, they too tight." "I don't care what you're saying," and pushed my head and put me in the backseat.

**Jerry:** In 2004, (my wife and son and I) were coming from the movies, and this East Grand Rapids police officer gets behind me at, like, Lake Drive and Hall Street. No tail lights were out. No tags expired.

So he follows me.

Well, right at the point where I get to the border of Grand Rapids, East Grand Rapids, he, uh, the lights on his car go on. (\*makes siren noise\*)

"Can I see your driver's license and registration?"

Well, I said, "Well, I'd be glad to give you my license and registration if you simply tell me what you stopping me for?"

"Sir, I'm not gonna ask you again."

"Well, I'm not gonna ask *you* again." That's what I told him.

"I wasn't speeding. I have a seat belt on. None of my equipment is defective. And I'm not a speeder."

I rolled the window up on him and called the cops.

I called the cops on the cops.

**Yamaka:** And then they got on they little blue intercom thing and he was like, "I need backup. I got a bunch of black kids out here acting stupid." Exact words. And I'm in the back, "I'm not stupid! I'm not stupid!" and of course I'm young, I don't know. And I'm yelling back and he's like, "Shut up!" And all of a sudden Rodney King popped in my head. And I started thinking like, "They're going to take me somewhere and beat me down and say I resisted, shut up." So I shut it up. There was a lady (cop), and she was laughing about the whole situation. "You know what's going to be funny? I'm going to be on vacation tomorrow and she's going to have her black ass in jail." And they took me to jail, and from my understanding my parents tried to get me out and they had me in there for larceny and somehow when I got out it was for disturbing the peace. I was traumatized by it for a long time. I was terrified of police. Every time I saw a police, I understood why people just run.

**Jerry:** Now, there's two African Americans on the East Grand Rapids police force, and one happens to be my wife's cousin. Okay?

I said, "Listen man, this is what's going on, blah blah blah blah blah."

he explains, "Man, they're doing a training mission."

I said, "Man, well you just can't arbitrarily stop me because you feel like getting training."

So I told my wife, "Hey, go to the ATM. Get a couple hundred dollars out. Because I, I'm, I'm biting the bullet. I ain't cooperating on this."

## Lines Complete 7

So, I get arrested.

He tells me in the car, "Hey, we were just doing probable cause searches."

I said, "You got the wrong guy. Because if I feel like it, if I feel like it, I'm gonna make a big deal about this. You're gonna be on the 11 o'clock news for some very unflattering things."

**Yamaka:** My dad was furious. We went down to the station, to try and file a suit. Worst thing I could've ever done. Basically the man just told me, "We protect our officers, and what I'll do is I'll keep it on file for a year." It didn't matter. System's created to protect each other and that terrified me even more because, the police can do anything they want to you. And you all basically just defend them.

**Rick:** See, what people say is, "The law is the law"

And I go, "So was Jim Crow. So was Slavery. The Dred Scott Decision was the law at one time. But it was horrible. It was totally unfair. It was brutal. It was oppressive. You want that again?"

**Sharon:** I wanted to go back to an example of (a black family) that lives in this neighborhood.

Actually they had two things happen in, in a short period of time.

The, the father works fulltime and, um, he also coaches for Ottawa Hills.

And he was leaving a game, walking towards his car, he heard one of the kid's parents from his team and one of his (players) sorta having an altercation with some other people, um, and he started moving towards him to see what was going on.

The group that was sorta giving them a hard time was not black.

And, um, so anyway, he came to try and settle things, and then in the midst of that, somebody called the police and when the police got there, they immediately went after him and the other black folks,

Assuming that the darker group was the one that was the instigator rather than the victim in the situation.

And he was trying to explain what was going on and the police officer told him

"If you don't stop, flappin' your lips, your big lips," or something like that.

and suddenly he was, um, charged with, um, hindering and opposing and, yeah.

And so then, he ended up handcuffed, going to jail.

They interrogated him and interrogated him and interrogated him. He was in jail like, for 24 hours.

Fortunately for the family they had a few thousand dollars in savings so they were able to get a lawyer, and the police did drop the charges. But they had him sign a paper that said he would not say anything negative about the city of Grand Rapids.

**Anonymous Woman 1:** The police will tell you too that the people who cause the trouble in this neighborhood are not the white people, but they always have police at some of the houses on the street because there's stuff going on.

**Sharon:** So then, one of the daughters who's five years old is at the mall and, um, her mom usually doesn't let her go off in a store by herself.

But, I think it's down by Penny's, Woodland Mall. There's a little jewelry store.

So her daughter was like, "Mom can I go over there?"

And she's like, "Yeah, you can go over there."

And she said, "I was looking at things and I would check and I would see her and I...and then, I looked and she was gone."

She heard an announcement on the intercom,

'Would the mother of', um, this young lady 'please come to the security department?'

## Lines Complete 7

The little girl, um, had been in the store and she saw a, um, a little sparkly back of, uh, I guess it was an earring on the floor.

And she picked it up and she looked at it and she put it in her pocket. It was just a broken piece of jewelry. And she's just five years old.

But they kinda, um, intimidated her and took her in this back room and had her empty her pockets out and everything.

If this little girl had been white and had picked up this little piece of sparkle on the floor, somebody would've said, "Where is your mommy?"

**Jerome:** In 1980, I'm told there was only 12 prisons in the state of Michigan.

Let me let you in on a secret.

97% of peoples of my congregation either been in jail, know someone in jail, or on their way to jail, got a husband or a brother or son in jail. You see what I'm sayin'?

**Jerry:** a young man from Ottawa Hills high school

Caught up in a series of burglaries.

In his needs assessment, he said he needed a mentor.

He's a senior in high school with no chance of graduating.

We cut a deal with the prosecutor on a make good basis, uh, that if he's able to make good on this, uh, avert trouble, that he'll, his felony will be expunged off his record.

He just graduated. He's now en, enrolled, waiting to move into the dormitories of a local college here.

He was gonna do 19 months in prison, prison. He was heading there.

**Sharon:** And what does the prison do? It does a lot of things. It provides jobs for a lot of people.

Um, they are able to farm people out for cheap labor when they're in prison.

Um, so, it just does a whole lot of things that, that continue to kinda carry forward that legacy of slavery except for under a different, a different guise.

**Jerry:** So we use it as an example.

You either wanna help them, or you don't.

They fail and die because you don't wanna help them.

We wanted to help him.

Now he's living.

**Yamaka:** I think it helped me more, internally. At some point I just let it go. That person they thought I was that night, that's not me. So it's like I'm not a statistic. And it gave me a story, you know? To share with my kids and stuff, and now I know to do something different. I'll have nice parties in the daytime.

### **ERASING LINES: Epilogue**

**Jerry:** But, what are you gonna do? You gotta keep pressing on. You gotta keep moving on. You gotta keep moving on.

**Rick:** The very first thing: be intentional. Absolutely number one. Be intentional.

## Lines Complete 7

**Janice:** Right, and I think the first step is to say okay, there must be another world out there – I'm gonna go find it. So where am I gonna go out to dinner? Where am I going to go grocery shopping? Where am I going to go to the movies? Where am I going to go for a walk? And start deliberately looking for another way of being.

**“Lisa Johnson”:** That's how you change junk. When people make assumptions and stereotype you into something you're not, don't just walk away, have a conversation with them, build a relationship with them. You take it into your own place and you don't let it become suffering.

**Rick:** Number two, cultural sensitivity.

Um, don't go into, as a white European one of the worst things you can do is to walk into a room of people of color and say, “You're broken and I know how to fix you.”

**Jeff:** So I'm constantly learning, I'm constantly checking myself, just in terms of like when is it appropriate for me to use privilege – my privilege as a white heterosexual male – to actually do something good, and when are there times when I make sure that people who aren't white heterosexual men take initiatives, or take the lead on something.

**Rick:** And the third: Listen. Listen to the stories of real people who are going through this. Listening and storytelling stimulates action.

**John Lee:** If we don't tell our stories, we'll continue to be owned by them. They'll continue to author you. We have to own our histories, right? Do a real, what we call a racial inventory. How did race affect your grandfather? Can you own that?

**“Lisa Johnson”:** We need more confession coming from both sides. This is the only thing that will really begin to bring us some healing.

**Rick:** And then number four. Become an activist.

**Laura:** We've gotta call this city into account, and then we've gotta stand together to hold this city accountable to do what people of color need whether it's education, health care, business. We gotta know what we need.

**Rick:** And number 5 here, the biggest thing is become, come to a place where you feel this. Where it becomes a passion. Once you have that, you can't help but get involved.

**Nancy:** when we were getting ready to, um, send our 5-year-old to kindergarten, we were trying to find the right school. So, we went to, we interviewed lots of schools, And we went to this one school, and he's so excited, he was holding my hand, and he was like skipping in. And we sat down for a minute, and he said, “Mom. Let's get out of here.” I said, “Okay.” So as we're walking out I say, “Why are we leaving?” And he said, “Everybody's skin looks like my skin.” And I thought, “Yeah! That's why we're leavin'!”

## Lines Complete 7

And I thought, "We've made a difference."  
And I thought, "That's progress."

**John Lee:** I don't think a lot of us have owned our past. It's embarrassing. It's shameful. And I'm not talking about white people feeling guilty, I'm talking about, just own it, right? I mean, there's a stage of guilt, but you get over it. But own it and then the conversations become a little easier.

**Jerry Bishop:** That's what we need to do. Stop talking. Start doing. Meet. Action.

**John Lee:** To really get out of the illusions, to really open your eyes involves some really tough work, right?