

STEPHEN DAVIS

My Journey in Embracing Discomfort

Growing up as one of the few Black students in a predominantly white school and community, I learned early on what it meant to stand alone. Not by choice, but by circumstance. The curriculum rarely reflected my history, my culture, or my identity because who would emphasize them? And for whom? The five other Black students in my school and me? When history lessons skimmed over the voices of people who looked like me, we had no voices loud enough to challenge it. And when we did see ourselves in the curriculum, the experience was just as isolating.

Imagine sitting in a U.S. history class as the only Black student when the topic of slavery comes up. Every whip, every lash, every death—suddenly, 30 pairs of eyes shift toward you, waiting, watching. Are you supposed to react? To cry? To educate them? I refused to give them that satisfaction. I refused to let my pain become their spectacle. This is embracing discomfort.

The only Black teacher, counselor, or administrator I ever saw in my elementary, middle, or high school years taught this class. I fought to be in his classroom, begged my middle school counselor to place me there because for once, I wanted to learn about MY history from someone who looked like me. Finally, I thought, someone who would understand. Someone who would see me.

That was 8th grade. And from that day forward, I made a vow: I would never sit through another history class again. The weight of that isolation was unbearable. In high school, I told my counselor everything, and he listened. He didn't dismiss me. He didn't tell me to toughen up. Instead, he created a pathway that made the impossible possible. He found online college history courses that counted for both high school and college credit—so I would never have to relive that pain in a classroom again.

Now, it's about turning alienation into ambition, transforming every moment of isolation into fuel for my purpose. I refused to let the lack of representation define my path. Instead, I let it ignite a fire within me. I realized that my presence in the field of counseling could be more than just symbolic, it could be a lifeline for students who feel as lost and unseen as I once did. The one person who truly saw me, who listened when I spoke about the racial inequalities embedded in the system, was a counselor. And that's when it clicked, that's what I needed to be. My experiences did not break me; they strengthened me, shaping a vision of the future where I become the mentor I once longed for. Where I disrupt the cycle of underrepresentation and stand as proof that change is not only possible but necessary. This is embracing discomfort.

Pursuing a career in education means stepping into the space I once searched for. A space where students can look at me and know, you belong here, you can do this and someone believes in you. Because representation is more than just being present in the room; it is about opening doors that have been shut for too long. When students never see themselves reflected in leadership, success feels like a distant dream. I want to shatter that illusion.

But my role isn't just about being seen, it's about taking action. Visibility alone is not enough. I want to empower students to push beyond the limitations society places on them, to take control of their narratives, and to believe in possibilities beyond what they've been told. I want to equip them with the confidence, tools, and support they need to rise just as I did. Just as I will continue to do. This is embracing discomfort.

The theme of Embracing Discomfort is one I have lived. I have faced the isolation of being the only one who looked like me in classrooms, the frustration of an education system that overlooked my identity, and the fear of stepping into a profession where minority representation remains limited. Yet, like a rose growing through concrete, I have found strength in adversity. My journey is a testament to the power of persistence, representation, and the transformative effect of mentorship.

To those who read this and feel unseen, unheard, or unsupported, know that your experiences matter. Your discomfort does not define your limits; it defines your growth. And one day, you may be the voice, the mentor, or the representation that someone else needs to see. This is embracing discomfort.

Long live the roses that grew from concrete.