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Slug: Black men in America  
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Her son is 11 and in the middle of a growth spurt. He can almost look her in the eye now. He loves football, Batman, Pokémon and video games. He wanted a BB gun for his birthday this year. But his mother refused to buy it for him. He was disappointed, but he says he understands why.

He's one year younger than Tamir Rice was when Tamir was shot and killed by a Cleveland, Ohio police officer on November 22, 2014 while carrying an Airsoft replica rifle.

Amy Jaskowiak, a white woman living in rural Ohio, can't forget that. It could have been her son Gabriel, who is black. That's why she refuses to buy him that BB gun.

As Gabriel has grown, Amy has noticed a difference in the way people react to him, especially in stores, where he is eyed suspiciously until they realize he's with her. It makes her afraid of what will happen to him when he's out by himself. It makes her fearful of what will happen as he starts to look more like an adult.

"One thing the adoption case worker said 11 years ago haunts me," Amy says. "She said that everyone loves a cute baby. It's when they grow up that you may find people are having a harder time with the man your son becomes."

So she talks to Gabriel. Repeatedly. Amy tells him how to react when stopped by the police, even if he did nothing wrong. She tells him not to wear the hood of his hoodie up over his head. She tells him to never, ever, give anyone any reason to believe he has a weapon on him.

Overall, she feels woefully underprepared. How can she, a white woman, prepare her son for what it's like to be a black man in America? To deal with the misconception that he grew up poor and fatherless? That he's lazy? That he's up to no good?

The stereotypes are difficult to fight. They will follow her son, and other black boys, all of their lives. It doesn't matter that studies have proven those misconceptions to be wrong.

In 2013, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that black fathers are highly involved in their children's lives. This holds true for custodial and non-custodial fathers, both married and un-married. In fact, black fathers were reported to be more involved in the day-to-day care of their children than their white and Hispanic counterparts. Yet, the myth of the absent, uninvolved black father remains.

And what about the stereotype of the uneducated black man? That too, is a myth, says Maurice Stinnett, the Dean of Students at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Stinnett speaks with an animated intensity as he talks about a study by Ivory A. Toldson, a professor at Howard University. In his study, Professor Toldson found that black males from two-parent households or one-parent households where the father remained involved were academically on track.

An interesting facet of Toldson's study is that black males who grew up in households where only the mother is present (much like the home Stinnett himself grew up in) were more likely to stay on track in the academic world than in homes where they were raised only by their fathers.

Stinnett says that the real tragedy behind these misconceptions is that they play into the high incarceration rate for black males, as well as racial profiling incidents by law enforcement.

The PEW Research Center reports that black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men. A similar report from the American Civil Liberties Union to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in October of 2014 says that black men are given harsher sentences than white men who commit the same crimes.

Stinnett believes that the deaths of young men like Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray and others were fueled by the common misconceptions regarding black men.

Stinnett says that it doesn't matter that there are successful black men in the public eye. It doesn't matter that these stereotypes factor into high incarceration rates and racial profiling. These stereotypes have led to the deaths of black men and boys, bringing their plight to the forefront of the public mind.

Tamir Rice. Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Eric Garner. And more. The litany of names has spurred on protests in predominately black communities as well as the Black Lives Matter movement.

And yet, the stereotypes remain, ignoring the successes of black men like President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Ignoring the successes of the thousands of black men who graduated high school, pursued college educations and have successful careers and family lives. Instead, the public continues to buy into the misconceptions, often leading to tragic results.

"White men who make 'mistakes' are boys, while actual black boys – Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, or Mike Brown – are seen as thugs or demons who deserved their own deaths for their perceived mistakes," says Stinnett. "Our nation must honestly admit, unpack, and discuss our historical, structural and personal issues with race if we ever want a nation where our black children are safe."

Stinnett believes that it is up to him and other black men in his position to speak out. He believes that his position in a historically black university can help him to aid other minorities who are seeking higher education. He hopes that he and others like him can help in disproving the misconceptions, in bringing light to the plight of the black man in America. He thinks that it's the very least he can do given the opportunities he's been presented with and his success in life. He knows that his education and his status in his community won't always protect him from the harsh reality black Americans face every day.

"I realize more than ever that I am Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Akai Gurley and Eric Garner," Stinnett says. "My education, employment, achievements, beliefs and zip code do not separate me from this ultimate sacrifice that my brothers and sisters made for being black in the United States of America."

He feels that he owes it to those who have paid the price for their blackness. He owes it to their families. And to women like Amy who are raising their own black sons.

Amy clings to the hope that one day, her son will join the ranks of those who speak out and lead in dispelling the myths. The hope that some day her son and other black boys will, as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said on that summer's day in Washington D.C., "live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." And she hopes that one day her son will be able to buy a BB gun for her grandchildren without that ever persistent, paralyzing fear creeping into the back of his mind.

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