


2023

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Recommended Citation

Salmond, Jessica (2023) "Flipping the Script as a Black Mother Living in My Community: A Self-Advocate's Perspective from Baltimore," *Developmental Disabilities Network Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/ddnj/vol3/iss1/4>

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Flipping the Script as a Black Mother Living in My Community: A Self-Advocate's Perspective from Baltimore

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My name is Jessica. I am a self-advocate from Baltimore, Maryland. I want to share a little bit about a racism situation that happened to me. I'm a single mom of seven. I have six boys and one girl with a disability, and I also have a disability. I am 36, a proud Black mom, and this is part of my story working with the disability systems that are supposed to be helping me.

Because of my disability and my kids' disabilities, we qualify for affordable housing assistance. I have an affordable housing voucher, but I have run into many situations where landlords and maintenance staff treat me and my family poorly because of the color of our skin and our disabilities. For example, a few years ago I was living in an apartment in the country outside of Baltimore where we experienced terrible racism. Our apartment needed some maintenance work and repairs, so the leasing office sent a maintenance team to our apartment.

When they came to the apartment, they saw that I was a young, single, Black mom and they asked me how I was able to get approval to live in my home. They asked me, "This is sorta in the country and you're living out here in these woods with kids, and you're pregnant! How were you able to get something like this"?

I said, "What's that supposed to mean"?

The maintenance guy said, "Is your man at home"?

Again, I said to them, "What is that supposed to mean? I'm Black. I'm a mom. I can live wherever I want to. I can have a man, or not. It's not your job to judge me! You're supposed to be fixing the apartment up not judging me or my kids."

The maintenance guy replied: "Well, y'all Black people just think that y'all can benefit off of us because we know that you didn't fully pay for this apartment by yourself."

This experience didn't make me feel like I was valued or respected. I didn't feel like the maintenance worker was listening to me, and I didn't like that he was judging me based upon my skin color, disabilities, and the assumptions he made about my background. This experience didn't make me feel like I was welcome in my home or my community. After this experience, they started to try and kick me out of my home. They started to say that my kids did something that they didn't really do. When I went to the leasing office to fill out my lease renewal, they were not helpful at all. They made fun of me and laughed at me as I tried to fill out the lease renewal

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application. They kept saying that I didn't understand the application, that I didn't understand how to do it, and they kept trying to be funny about it and didn't help me at all. It felt like they were just looking for an excuse to kick me out of my home.

I ended up getting some more people involved, like my caseworkers and some other advocates. I also ended up getting a lawyer involved. My lawyer was from the Maryland Disability Law Center, and they helped me to stay in my home. They helped me work through the different laws and systems that are out there to protect the rights of people like me. They helped me stay in my home!

Because I am a person with a disability and because I am Black, I often experience discrimination like this. I have experienced racism and discrimination in systems and agencies that are supposed to help me. Disability agencies tell me that I can't have children because I have a disability, and I've had people tell me that I can't take care of my children because of my disabilities. Let me say this, disability doesn't define us as mothers, fathers, stepmothers, or stepfathers! We can do anything as long as we put our mind to it. We can achieve our goals and be good parents and provide good homes for our children. Discrimination needs to stop! Nobody should be allowed to report you because you have a disability and because they think that you can't raise your child.

I'm glad that me and my family didn't have to move. My experience with housing was talked about a lot in the advocacy community, and the Maryland Housing Authority asked me if I would be willing to share my story. They said that they wanted to turn my experience into a play about the challenges that I faced with finding and keeping my home. They actually paid me to tell my story and I get to go see the play any time that I want to!

A writer called me and helped to write the script. They wanted to know everything—all of my moves and all of my moods. When they first put on the play, the actress who played me looked just like me and she acted just like me so that was quite an experience! I really enjoyed the play and so did everyone else. It is a really different way to call attention to discrimination against people with disabilities and people from different racial and ethnic groups. My experience and the play based upon my story helps people to know that they are not alone, and that you can stand up and fight for your rights with support from friends and other advocates.

At the end of the day, moms, wives, students, and other people shouldn't have to wonder if we are safe and welcomed in our homes and communities. We need to stop our social service agencies from discriminating against people with disabilities. As long as our children are going to school, are well-kept, are healthy, and are going to their appointments we should be allowed to be parents—even if we need assistance and help. Just because we ask for help, whether that be from family, friends, somebody from church, a social service agency, or an emergency system, doesn't mean that we can't live on our own and raise our families. Many of these services are out here to benefit us. As long as we are able to live day to day and take care of our family, others should not have to go through what I had to go through.

Social workers, disability support providers, advocates, and even lawyers need to be better

trained and need more resources to support people with disabilities that have children. Too many children with disabilities are taken from their families by social service agencies who think that they know how to care for them better. I want to see a system that provides better supports and better outcomes for parents with disabilities. It doesn't matter if the parent can't see, or can't hear, or has an intellectual disability. It doesn't matter! Their disability does not define them. They also want to be loved, to have a family, to live in a home, and be part of a community—just like you!