
Still Lifting, Still Climbing

*Contemporary African American
Women's Activism*

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Chapter Two

To Be Young, Female, and Black

Angela Ards

Fifteen students and one teacher, we met Monday through Thursday, 12:30 to 2:00, the fall of 1994, in a closet of a space with one skinny window overlooking 83d Street and West End Avenue on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The class, which I'd designed, was "Passport to Independence," a work-skills/self-esteem course for teenage mothers living with their children at the West End Intergenerational Residence (WIR—part homeless shelter, part adult-education center, part job-training program).

Recently out of grad school and, at 25, only about six years their senior, I felt my students had more real-world smarts than I might ever have, that they knew a side of Black womanhood that I would never get reading bell hooks or Michele Wallace or Alice Walker. And yet, all semester, in room 507, around four card tables laid head-to-head, I led them in desultory conversations about "the myths and realities of independence": of going from welfare to work, from dropouts to graduates, from living in a shelter to making a living in society. When there were no sick babies, WIC appointments, clinic visits, or unexcused absences, and the class was full, to make room I would vacate my spot at the makeshift table and sit on the window sill, shoes propped on the busted radiator. There, at the head of the class, I looked more like the teacher than I wanted to.

Generally, my students had come from inner-city neighborhoods with tough-sounding names and reputations to match: Do or Die Bed-Stuy, Never Ran Never Will Brownsville, the Boogie Down Bronx, Harlem. More specifically, they'd come from an Emergency Assistance Unit, or another homeless shelter, or a foster home, or a friend's home, maybe even their parents' (usually their mother's), for reasons I never really knew,

though I sometimes heard tales of abuse-sexual, physical, substance. What I did know was that they were all young, poor, single mothers, mainly of color, with a few hard skills to trade an employer for a living wage. My class was intended to help them turn all that around.

A year before, in November 1993, on a whim, a personal dare, I'd come to New York seeking fame and fortune as a writer. Fresh out of school with a degree better for the soul than for solvency, I landed a copyediting gig paying dirt and decided it was a "sign" to go for broke pursuing a dream. Come April, color my parachute bust and me, looking for a job.

As far as job-search techniques go, the want ads are a long shot. Networking, it's said, is your best bet: you tell two friends, and they tell two friends, and so on. But at the time, as a newcomer to the city, my net didn't feel so big.

In the *New York Times* classifieds, under EDUCATION, an ad sought a career/vocational specialist to develop internships and self-esteem workshops for adolescent women of color at the West End Intergenerational Residence. I'd never heard of a "career/vocational specialist," but for the salary offered, I'd be one. So I pieced together my resume, boasting of my experience with internship placements (I'd codesigned a field study seminar one quarter); "at-risk youth" (I'd tutored GED students in Watts one year); and social issues affecting women of color (my graduate studies focused on Black feminist theory). This would be a chance, I told myself, to put all my ivory-tower knowledge to some real-world use.

I went for an interview with the social service director of WIR. A middle-aged white woman, who seemed to be waiting for retirement, welcomed me into her office, an expanse of dingy yellow with faux-Impressionist paintings seemingly on every wall. A photographic history called *The African Americans* was pointedly placed on a file cabinet. On the cover was a Black woman with textured natural hair, chin cradled in one palm. With my resume inert on her desk, the director asked few questions about my skills and experience, just smiling blankly at my Black face, my short 'fro blooming beyond its borders into the coils of baby dreads. Clearly, I was being hired to be a real live walking talking African American role model. But, I thought, who better than me, a Black feminist with a sense of righteousness and advocacy, for the job?

When I told my family and friends I'd be teaching work skills to teen moms in a homeless shelter, if not tactfully asking, why a *shelter? why you?*, they warned *alto voce* that working with welfare recipients would

be a thankless task. "You *know* you don't know what you're getting into," my aunt Cat said the week before I was to start. I'd gone home for a little family support and we were in her East Texas barbershop, me getting a trim, she holding forth among her regular patrons and Dallas relations paying an overdue visit. She'd been chatting and clipping all afternoon but stopped to let this comment hover. Mercifully, the mirror in front of us mediated a look telling she feared me a young fool.

"You think?" I asked, more out of respectful acknowledgment than any real interest in her response. By then I'd grown weary of the belly-of-the-beast cautionary tales. When she handed me Ken Auletta's *The Underclass*, mumbling too loudly that I would sure need it, I was stone-faced except for a little tight smile of thanks that slit my eyes. And when she whisked me into the house of her friend Edwardlene, who gave me stacks of vocational curriculum materials that I had the good sense to know I really did need, I was inwardly chanting, "I'm only one but I am one" and "If not me, who?" determined to help break the cycle of poverty, albeit in one small corner of the world. Aunt Cat and Miss Edwardlene waved me along back to New York with little tight smiles of their own.

West End Intergenerational Residence, except for the shabby blue scaffolding buckling under the weight of too many seasons, blends in with its middle-class surroundings. Walking by, on your way to Zabar's, or Barnes & Noble, or the Gap, you'd never know that inside is a homeless shelter for 54 single mothers on public assistance, ages 17 to 21, and their preschool-aged children; they stay anywhere from three months to a year. You might not notice the stream of Black and brown women pushing baby strollers toward Broadway, sometimes veering off to Riverside Park—they're a common enough sight on the Upper West Side. What tells is that the women are so young, and the babies they're caring for in the middle of the day are their own.

At WIR, "independent living" is stressed, with the young women residing in private single rooms, responsible for their own meals, [all] their transportation, and their children. While waiting for a low-income apartment to become available, they participate in a battery of programs designed to keep them from being homeless again, including GED classes, parenting and life-skills workshops, and the career-guidance program.

Using a collage of influences, I eagerly set about creating a two-part curriculum stressing both personal and career development. My sistagirl

Terri loaned me a self-help pamphlet borrowed from her aunt. Called "Self-Esteem Passport," it provided me with the course's name and its guiding metaphor: a journey to self-awareness and independence, achieved with the help of certain essential visas—values, dreams, goals, networking. Miss Edwardlene's vocational materials let me know what a job-readiness course should look like. Then I threw in some material of my own, written works and music with a woman-centered sensibility that ranged from Billie Holiday to Salt-N-Pepa, Nikki Giovanni to Pearl Cleage.

I wasn't so idealistic as to believe that my students and I would automatically connect because of our race and sex. Though a fundamental tenet of Black feminism is that we experience "interlocking systems" and "simultaneity" of oppressions, I was aware of the tendency to oversimplify the differing effects of race, sex, and class on each Black woman's life. I first acknowledged this diversity of Black sisterhood when I sought out the one Black and female like me, thinking she could relate to my "issues"—she could not. Yet, in America, all Black women are affected by the same image whether they're manipulated by the "Contract on America" or mutilated in BET/MTV videos. Which is why I thought that, in some way, our common blackness and femaleness could collapse differences—of teacher and student, education and class—into a circle of sisterhood.

For Week One on my syllabus, the primary objective is "to create a comfortable and safe environment for discussion and sharing." I try to break the ice with the usual describe-yourself-with-the-first-initial-of-your-name games. Like that Jackie, who *will* not let the class proceed until I note on my roster, in pen, the new spelling of her name ("Jacqué"), is joyful. (All the names in this piece have been changed.) And that Elayne, who I can now admit was a favorite, is "evil, because everybody says I am." At first Phylicia—who is soon known as Leese—can't think of an adjective to describe herself. A few moments pass with her looking at the floor, us looking at her, and then Monica ("mellow, 'cause I got Jesus") offers "patient." "Yes, ummph, she is pa-tient," Phylicia's classmates chorus, citing instances of her parental equanimity in the face of a tyrannical toddler. Except for the one young woman who wants to be called Ms. Stanley (she has a two year-old son nicknamed Daddy), I plan for us to be on a first-name basis. Call me Angela, I insist; I don't really see myself as an authority figure. When they opt, instead, to call me Miss Angela, I realize that they do.

In their travels through the social welfare system, these young women had taken many "world of work" training courses that eventually, like this one, segued into a discussion on the pros and cons of welfare reform. Earlier that June, 19 months after winning the '92 presidential election with a campaign promise "to end welfare as we know it," Bill Clinton at last announced his plan: two-year time limits for welfare recipients, workfare programs, child support enforcement. Everyone in my class gave ready approval.

Melissa, an 18-year-old mother of two, who dreams of saving a younger brother from the streets after she earns her GED and becomes a nurse, commends the work requirements as "a good start" in getting welfare recipients "off their butt" rather than simply "waiting around for the checks to come." "It does make you lazy," she concedes.

Others applaud Clinton's intention to reduce the number of teenage births, though no one is more vocal than Sheila, 19 and pregnant with her second child. "To me the Clinton plan is a big change in welfare because a lot of girls have babies to get more money." Affirmative nods ricochet around the room. "I think it is a good thing," Sheila continues, "and I'm with it 100 percent."

And so on for the remainder of the period. "Why would you make a baby if you can't be ready?" asks Aiesha, blasting deadbeat parents and, inadvertently, herself. But in the ultimate irony, Dionica, homeless like all her classmates, says of the preliminary proposals to deny benefits women under 18: "And some teen mothers should stay home."

These were not the responses I'd been expecting. I'd culled from the *New York Times*, the United Way, Homes for the Homeless, and welfare-rights advocate Frances Fox Piven a list of statistics to debunk myths of welfare queens, of cheats and frauds sittin' on the stoop smokin' spliffs and drinkin' forties, of lazy, promiscuous women causing the downfall of the nation as they passed on their degenerate values to their children. When my class agreed that welfare encourages teen pregnancy and poverty, I pointed out that other countries have higher benefits but a fraction of the teen births, suggesting that early parenting is more a function of poverty than poor relief. When they parroted arguments that welfare reform should be aimed at teenage mothers, I informed them that a high percentage of teen mothers have a history of sexual abuse, and that two-thirds of all teen pregnancies involve adult men over 20, suggesting an epidemic of statutory rape rather than promiscuity. But every time I attacked a "myth," my students earnestly confirmed another.

I don't know if they had internalized these popular images of Black women or if they were telling me what they thought they should, but by the end of the semester I knew for a fact that the myths were just that. Melissa, who told me welfare "does make you lazy," proved to be the hardest-working student in my class, meeting me repeatedly during office hours to find a nurse's aide training program she could attend after completing her GED. And Sheila, the 19-year-old mother pregnant with her second child, seemed far more preoccupied with worry than thoughts of a windfall. But it took me a while to sort out when they were being themselves and when I was being treated like an authority figure with whom they had to wear the mask.

WIR began as a joint venture of the New York Archdiocese, the New York Foundling Hospital, and Fordham University. More than a way station on the road to a Section 8 apartment, it aims to help the young women achieve the tools for self-sufficiency—and often succeeds. But after six months as the career/vocational specialist, the gauntlet of educational and employment programs required in order to get housing began to look like hazing: a bunch of hoops to jump in order to be recognized as citizens entitled to government services. In the name of "discipline" and "structure," the head of all the caseworkers—a nun with the demeanor of a pledge master—revoked weekend passes, WIR's equivalent of furlough, for the slightest breach of house rules. She was also the housing specialist, whose favor one did well to court because she could determine whether you were placed in a roach/drug/violence-infested tenement or a renovated development.

WIR's program seemed to subscribe, perhaps unwittingly, to a school of thought that some defect in character, family history, or ethnic heritage causes poverty. Staff members struggled assiduously against calling the young women "mothers," as if it were a dirty word that might be a bad influence; as if poverty were a state of mind and that, simply by transforming their thoughts, the women might transcend the structural inequalities of the inner city. Administrators would proudly tout the affluent ambiance of the Upper West Side as a key component of the WIR program. "They need exposure to different environments, to see another side of life," the executive director was fond of saying.

"They need social graces and etiquette," my supervisor had said during my initial job interview, explaining the self-esteem classes I was to conduct. Once, she recalled while on a field trip to a swanky restaurant,

the women went for the roasted chicken with the salad fork, embarrassing the staff and, consequently, themselves. "They need realistic goals," she said, explaining what the aims of my world-of-work program should be. Many young mothers, she said, came in with dreams of being lawyers and doctors, "and we shouldn't set them up for lots of disappointment."

Truth to tell, I wasn't the best candidate to teach anyone about proper behavior for anything, especially the world of work. My corporate drag was piecemeal; I came in late most days; and was increasingly sullen, almost insubordinate, around my supervisor. But I tried. From the *Mind Your Manners* book Miss Edwardlene had given me, I brushed up on "business etiquette" and "workplace expectations." I found the information so enlightening that I compiled a world-of-work handbook for the women. With easy reference headings like "Dress Code/Self-Presentation," "Attendance/Absences/Tardiness," "Calling-In," and "Supervision," my pamphlet emphasized the importance of a strong attendance record, of punctuality, and of a professional presentation in getting and keeping a job.

My first duty as the career/vocational specialist was to coordinate the annual summer program, in which the young women volunteered at various nonprofits and private businesses for six weeks. The internship program, overseen by an advisory panel, was ostensibly to teach the young women work skills that could result in a real job. During a week of orientation, I explained what would be expected of them. I also told them what they could expect: a learning experience that would enhance their skills and career contacts and, at the very least, offer self-respect for a job well done.

Like interns the world over, of course, they were given menial tasks, all the grunt work staff members didn't want to do: stamping dates on labels, reinforcing three-hole binding, filing, serving, gofering. Which would have been fine if WIR, and then I, hadn't promised that these experiences were going to be meaningful. But essentially, beggars can't be choosers, and the young women were expected to do the meanest work and smile about it. When they expressed dissatisfaction, acknowledging that their needs had not been met, they were reprimanded for having "attitude" and "no respect for authority." Initially, I arranged one-on-one meetings weekly with them, ranting from my handbook about insubordination and the need for flexibility. But then I learned that, at one site, a supervisor was harassing my students, calling them lazy welfare queens

looking for a free ride. When I read one student's evaluation of the summer program—"No more volunteer work. Jobs with pay. We need money"—I began to think, like writer Jill Nelson, "Can we talk about volunteer slavery?"

Just how much this program and the system it mirrors, was about control, not discipline or work ethics or achieving self-respect, became evident in my own interaction with Tanesha. She was the free spirit of WIR, the kind of woman people gossip about because they find her so unique, and early on we struck up a friendship. She would come by my office almost every day to talk about whatever, and I loaned her books. A favorite was a book of poetry, *We Are the Young Magicians*, a bold proclamation of 21st-century Black womanhood, by my sistafriend Ruth Forman.

For the summer program, Tanesha is assigned to work in the pharmacy at a hospital. But it's a rather mismatched placement, since she's interested in social work and doesn't like going down into a basement every day in the middle of the summer. And I wouldn't either. But like a good career/vocational specialist, I call her into the office about her absences. She always, always has a barrage of suspect, though gracious, excuses that I moderately chew her out about. But one day, tired of our ritual, I guess, she explains her behavior with a flip, "I guess I have summer fever and just didn't feel like going." Before, during our marathon talks, I'd encouraged her to talk freely and honestly with me. But that day I would have rather that she lied. Before I knew it, I'd restricted her weekend pass.

In fact, every day I was feeling more and more like Miss Angela. Once a week, I scheduled career-development workshops in the evening with the New York Junior League. Bearing "door prizes" and bedecked in jewels, the NYJL volunteers presented fun, engaging workshops on how to use the want ads, find job-training programs, give an interview. But in an effort to get more women of color to volunteer, I arranged for Dreams Into Action, professional women of color committed to mentoring teenage girls, to present a minifair. Evening workshops tried the patience of my students, who, after a full day of classes, had to pick up their children, fix dinner, and then put their babies to bed. So participation would be grudging but usually forthcoming after great cooing, prodding, and insistence from me. But during the DIA workshop, young ladies who gave the NYJL their undivided attention whispered back and forth to each other, laughed out loud, spoke out of turn, slouched, and looked as if they really could not care less. At first I thought it was because the DIA pre-

sentations lacked the polish and glitz of the NYJL's. But the tension in the room was far more than disappointment, it was resentment.

After a veteran social worker gave her spiel, Jacqué (formerly Jackie), who'd sought me out to develop a five-year plan that would put her on the path to being a social worker, essentially told the DIA that no one had said anything about anything relevant to her goals. And it was true. More accustomed to advising college-bound seniors, they'd talked about SATs and entry-level jobs requiring four-year college degrees. And my students, unaccustomed to people who looked like them having obvious wealth, had no patience. As the usual eight o'clock cutoff point approached, while a mentor was still presenting, Cicely, an exceptionally bright young woman whose demand for answers about everything both inspired and exasperated me, yelled out, "Miss Angela, what time is it? Isn't it time to go?" Our eyes locked and I hoped her retinas burned. I then rolled mine with a vengeance.

The next day in class, I was the one chastised. I was told my eye rolling was most unprofessional, my ignoring their obvious dissatisfaction with the irrelevancy of this workshop rude. I tried to regain the upper hand by lecturing from the handbook, but after my behavior the day before, the point was moot. After I finished, Aisha raised her hand as we'd agreed to do in the class contract, to ask if I would let them go early. I had the equivalent of a core meltdown and not only dismissed class early but canceled it for the rest of the week—out sick.

The summer program finally ended in a flurry of ceremonies and a rooftop party with a theater theme. I designed the invitations one morning at home after I'd called in to say that I'd be late—lying about waiting for the plumber to come fix a clogged toilet. Over a clapboard graphic, the invite cover read, "It's the Final Act of the 1994 WIR Summer Program." Inside, the "starring" cast of interns and their various assignments were listed like credits on ticker tape with a trailer of "Hope to see you on the 'scene.' Curtain Call's Tuesday, August 16, 12 noon." I threw in some black, swirly borders for flair. Corny, I thought, but cute.

Everyone who completed the summer program, which was everybody, got a certificate of achievement. They had ribbonlike borders in pastel pink and blue, with festive, confetti-looking dots of purple sprinkled across the face. I signed my name on the designated line, tight above the "Career/Vocational Specialist" title I'd typed in.

For those who I thought best exemplified "work maturity skills" I gave special awards, soap and lotion sets in exotic fruit scents, donated by Bath & Body Works: "Best Attendance," "Most Flexible," "Most Professional Attire," "Most Outstanding," "Most Improved," et cetera. As I was bagging up the extra certificates and gifts for the no-shows, Sharee, a nursing-home intern whose evaluation summed her up as "always bright and cheerful," with an "excellent job performance when she was here," approached me about not getting an award.

"Miss Angela, why you didn't represent me?" What could be mistaken for an edge in her voice was more a brace against its breaking. "Why didn't you get a gift for me?"

Her incredulousness was catching because was I was thinking, yeah, Miss Angela, why? As I searched for an answer that would satisfy us both, in carefully modulated tones I acknowledged that, yes, she'd worked extremely well with a great attitude but had spotty attendance. I reminded her that her evaluation reported that she needed to "Focus on being a little more disciplined about coming to work."

The lightning should have struck. Me, whose sense of time is more intuitive than empirical, who takes every supervisor's directive with a grain of salt, telling someone about being a traditional worker in the world of work. Sure, she had missed eight days, which, for a six-week program, is a lot, but it's not like she was getting paid or had truly volunteered to do "the vital but at times menial tasks of a volunteer" (from the handbook). Lord knows, under far better living and working conditions I had taken enough mental health days to give Sybill peace of mind. Besides, a few of Sharee's days were because of doctor's appointments for her child. And for all I know, one day she just might have had a clogged toilet. I don't remember what I said to save face, but I do know that I reached into my bag and gave girlfriend a mango-scented toiletry set. There should have been a "Best Attitude" award anyway.

When the fall semester finally arrived and we were cooped up in room 507 around those card tables, I'd had enough of WIR but felt obligated to my students. Kara, whom I was helping to find a nurse's training program for fall, had written on her summer-program evaluation, "Angela is very important to me. We have plans, about my future, to make together." And with them still mouthing myths about themselves, I felt I still had work to do.

I began sharing womanist icons important to our history. around the walls, I hung posters from the Bread and Roses project series that cruised the subways that summer. Pictures of Maya Angelou, Ruby Dee, Alice Walker, Mae Jemison, Marion Wright Edelman, the Delaney Sisters, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ida B. Wells skirted the walls like family portraits over the stairwell, or your mother's bedroom bureau. In the company of other Black women, I felt my role-model burden lift a tad.

To lift it even further, I suggested that we create posters of our own "to help the students identify themselves as people with positive futures," the syllabus objective read. Called the Woman That I Am, a title from a book of literature by women of color by my mentor-friend Soyini, our series hung alongside the Women of Hope. In between Ida and Fannie and Mae, our beautiful Black, female faces emerged. At least figuratively, it was that circle of sisterhood that I'd been hoping for.

But in reality, those posters highlighted just how different we were. I'd been warned about encouraging unrealistic goals for the young women, but I pushed them to go ahead and dream. For "dream jobs" people listed social worker, computer operator, recording engineer. On my poster, I wrote writer, as absurd and unrealistic as that felt. However, with resources that I could tap into at will—family support, great friends, education—I knew that I could be almost anything I wanted. But could they?

I did my best to give them tools to fulfill those dreams that had to do with the sometimes arcane "world of work." On resumes, with strokes of pen and fanciful phrases—similar to the ones that got me this job—I made them into highly skilled workers. Informal baby-sitting jobs I glibly transformed into Child Care Provider. Under SKILLS I suggested they include "Head of Household." They seemed as gratified as I was to identify qualities and resources they had to share with their family, friends, and communities.

It isn't lack of ability that will stop them. They were eager to explore their possibilities and how to achieve them. But months after I left WIR, people were still looking for their chance. Inquisitive Cicely had applied for and been offered a hotel internship but was still waiting for the program head to call her back. I don't know what happened to Renee, a quick wit and leader among her peers who sabotaged plans we made for job-training programs, fearing success as much as failure. Once she returned from a weekend pass visibly bruised, and I began to understand what might be getting in her way. And she and her classmates won't be

helped by the welfare reform proposals festering in Congress, most repugnantly concerned only with how many children it would be cost-effective to throw off the rolls, with less regard for their mothers, who will fall deeper into poverty, scrambling for jobs that aren't there.

Against the odds society has given them, some do make it. One year after the summer program I ran into Tanesha up in Harlem, rushing to work. After the pharmacy debacle, we'd arranged a peer-counseling internship that had resulted in a position at a West Harlem community-based organization. I was covering a story about Mike Tyson and violence against women, and had flagged her down for a quote. "That's a sensitive issue," she said, "women's rights, Black women's rights." At 21, her budding womanist consciousness was broad enough to wish Tyson a second chance within the Black community along with a greater awareness of Black women's needs. "It's a lot of violence. If it's not in the music, it's in the way we're portrayed. It's a big problem, and I think it needs to be fought on all levels, just like a lot of other problems we have."

Then, for a good while, we just talked outside the Apollo, giving girlfriend updates. She and her gorgeous, you-should-be-in-pictures-if-they-weren't-so-sexist baby were fine. Her job she loved. And a few weeks before she'd bought a copy of Ruth's book of poetry—being hawked on 125th Street—and was now sharing it with all her friends. I gave her my number at the paper and told her to call, whenever. Shortly thereafter, she did. The community organization for which she was putting in mad hours—her summer fever now cured—was inviting all of New York to a family field day in honor of the group's founder and anniversary. Could I finagle some publicity? I did everything short of putting out an APB. More than a role model, I was able to be a resource, and at that moment, I felt both our nets grow all the wider.

NOTE

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