

**KNOW
YOURSELF TO
KNOW YOUR
WORTH**



Raven Jemison

My birthday is July 31. Whenever I mention that to someone familiar with astrology, their first response is usually, “Ohhhh, you’re a Leo!” To which, I immediately respond, “I’m not really” to rebuke the notion that I bask in the spotlight and crave attention as all Leos do.

After all, I was the introverted kid who was bullied by black kids for “acting white,” and I felt alone in white spaces. I always felt alone and invisible. It couldn’t be farther from the truth to say I wanted to be in the limelight and have all eyes on me.

My perspective changed after one speaking engagement.

As executive vice president of business operations for the Milwaukee Bucks, I’m often asked to speak to aspiring sports professionals. Early in my tenure at the Bucks, I was asked to speak on a panel for the SheBelieves Summit. The summit is US Soccer’s commitment to empower young women and girls while continuing to grow women’s soccer in the United States and across the globe. Attendees were a select group of women who were college-aged students and young professionals. The goal was to provide them with the opportunity to learn from and network with industry professionals.

I squeezed this engagement into my schedule. I was in and out of Los Angeles within twenty-four hours. After leaving the stage, I headed to grab a quick lunch with the attendees before rushing off to catch my flight back to Milwaukee.

As I stood in line for the buffet, I looked across the room and saw a black female staring through me. She was standing next to the table along with a couple of other students.

I waved awkwardly and proceeded to grab my plate. I headed in the direction of their table, and the look on her face was one of nervous excitement. She asked if I would join her and her friends for lunch. Never the cool kid growing up, I met her emotion with a smile and sat down.

I should probably lay out how I typically handle these situations. I'm often bombarded with requests for mentorship, résumé reviews, and "five minutes to pick my brain." LinkedIn has created avenues for "up and coming" professionals to dive deep into your experience to establish a connection. Truthfully, I wish I had LinkedIn when I was coming of age in the sports business industry. However, because little is taught on how to move a connection online to a live conversation in a networking setting, the interactions are often awkward. Picture rambling conversations with no elevator pitch in sight, and an ask for all the secrets about how to get in the industry.

I try not to judge. I remember how I got my start in the industry. I was not polished, and I had no idea how to make myself stand out among the others. Knowing how that one interaction could have changed the trajectory of my life, I push through the awkwardness to make eye contact and give sports career hopefuls my undivided attention.

I assumed the encounter with this woman would be much of the same. I was wrong.

Before I could put my plate down, she proceeded to tell me that she had been following me since her freshman year. She wrote a paper on my career in her freshman English Composition class. With tears in her eyes, she shared that she was also a queer woman. Her tears became uncontrollable sobbing.

After collecting herself, she thanked me for being an example of what's possible for a black queer woman ascending the ranks in spaces not built for us.

A flurry of emotions rushed through me as I listened to this woman share her story unabashedly. I was speechless, embarrassed, proud, grateful, and moved. What she didn't know was that I often felt invisible and overlooked, and she was giving to me what I had given to her: the feeling of being seen.

We proceeded to talk about similarities between the two of us. Most notably that we were the second person in our respective families to go to college. She didn't have connections in the industry. She wasn't attending an Ivy League school, which evoked concerns about getting a job in a competitive industry after college. She was me twenty years ago.

This encounter uncovered something deeper. My goal shouldn't be just to show what's possible on the surface.

No one told me how to get a job in sports. I didn't have any connections. But here I was, sitting in the C-suite of a multibillion-dollar organization. I thought sharing my story via podcasts and articles was good enough. Just sitting in the seat at the proverbial table was good enough and my work was done. Right?

I've been in this industry for seventeen years and have had too many of these conversations to remember. However, it was this moment when I realized that I was to her what gymnast Dee Dee Foster and my uncle Andre were to me. I was the peek behind the curtain. I was her beacon of light. I was no longer the person who believed it was just my hard work that got me here. Sure, I busted my ass to get two degrees and add value to the teams I've worked for—studying late and often, working ungodly long hours, sacrificing relationships. But it was a disservice to stop there when telling my story.

We owed it to the next generation to be truthful about the journey. Truthful about the joy and the pain, about the wins and losses, about the fears and courage, and about the twists and turns that made the journey worthwhile. Andre and Dee Dee were the epitome of what we call “Black Excellence” today. But there was more to their story. I never spoke to Dee Dee about her journey and my uncle passed away before we could discuss the level of successes in my career that brought both joy and pain.

Was Dee Dee ever told she should consider another sport other than gymnastics because her body was better suited for, say, track? My gymnastics coach told me that, and it put doubt into my mind as an already confused, twelve-year-old kid—a kid who was already struggling with body image issues as she battled puberty. If Dee Dee was discouraged during her career, how did she handle it?

How did she push through the discouragement and become the gymnast who excelled at the University of Alabama, a predominately white institution in the Heart of Dixie? Was she ever called “too white” because she valued an education and the doors it would open for her to see more than what was in front of her? I was, and it shaped my formative years.

Never cool enough to hang with my black peers, but too black to be welcomed into the white circles other than in the classroom.

My uncle changed careers from nursing to get a degree in mechanical engineering. This meant his work setting changed from a hospital dealing with patients to being in corporate boardrooms with prospective clients. Did he mute his “Southern” accent to a more neutral one, so he wouldn’t be met with the “slow and ignorant” trope? Did he go home exhausted every single day from not being able to show emotion like his white colleagues for fear of being seen as difficult to work with or the “angry black man”?

This is called code switching, a strategy for black people to successfully navigate interracial interactions that has large implications on their well-being, economic advancement, and even physical survival. Yes, I’ve had to code switch. “Don’t be the ‘angry black woman,’ be likable. Don’t be intimidating, look respectable. Don’t look too gay and maybe you’ll have a chance at a level playing field.” Those are the other full-time jobs that I, and members of many marginalized communities, have to hold alongside our day jobs.

Hearing that this young woman was facing the same challenges I faced two decades ago revealed something to me. Her seeing me in the seat was not enough. In her words, it was great to see me here, but she wanted to know the “how.”

This encounter uncovered something deeper. My goal shouldn’t be just to show what’s possible on the surface. To make the most of my platform, I needed to share what it took to navigate the various access points or service roads, such that I could help make their journey smoother.

Most importantly, I needed to be clear that it wasn't easy, which was also a good thing. Struggles in the short term were only obstacles and challenges to be conquered. Through those struggles, I gained tools in my arsenal to help me overcome adversity. Looking back, adversity was a gift, even though it didn't feel like it while I was going through it.

Know Yourself to Know Your Worth

Too often, societal influence determines who we are to the world. I knew if I gave into that influence, then I wouldn't be truly comfortable with the real me. I had to do the work, and I encourage you to do the same.

1. Define who you are before someone else does it for you. This will be your "center." The place for you to always come back to when doubt, fear, and trolls creep in.
2. Sit in and appreciate what makes you unique. There is no one like you, which means there is no one who can leverage what is unique to you and only you. Own it.
3. Your authentic self is good enough. When the time comes for you to tap into that, do it. Don't play small or shrink for anyone.

At times, the journey toward accepting all the pieces of me was a lonely one. It was accompanied by equal parts hard work and hard truths about how I wanted to show up in the world.

One step at a time, one day at a time, I attempted to make peace with the fact that I couldn't control how people viewed me as a black woman.

I slowly began to understand that I was born gay, and despite what I'd been taught growing up in the church, it wasn't a choice. I looked in the mirror each morning, styled my growing locs, and thought about the black women in the beauty shop from my youth. There wasn't a "one-size-fits-all" hairstyle that made those women beautiful. They were all different. I began reading books about the black women who were political and civil rights activists from the mid-1900s.

There was no such thing as a monolithic black woman. So why am I trying to fit into this box that I and others have created for me?

I slowly unburdened myself from the pressures of society to truly accept myself as me.

Positive affirmations became my second language. I am a queer, black woman, and I can only be the best "me" I can be.

This is who I am. It's not all I am, and it's not all I'll ever be. There will be many iterations of me as I evolve and continue to work on being the best version I can be. But at the core, I awakened to the possibility that I could impact and influence those who look and love like me only as the true version of me. Intersectionality was my gift to myself and others. I sat in gratitude of all my "otherness."

Acceptance of myself was the first step. It was a pivotal moment. An overwhelming level of joy and peace accompanied this moment. It's hard to explain as there has yet to be a point in my life that has replicated it. I slowly unburdened myself from the pressures of society to truly accept myself as me. Over time, I embraced my younger self as she tried to conform to the "All-American" standards of being a gymnast. I told her she no longer had to shrink to make room for others. The person she is today is grateful for the challenges we faced because it created the calluses needed to forge through unwelcoming spaces.

The second step on my journey was coming out at work and proudly living my life as a queer woman.

I realized this acceptance also made me a happier, more productive employee, and a better leader. I can't say I no longer have to code-switch or I never have bad days. I will say that after I came out, the view from where I was sitting was no longer clouded with the dread of balancing the "work me" and the "home me." I realized embracing the intersections in which I sit are not only valuable to me, but they're also valuable to any organization that's lucky to have me.

As I've grown in my career, I've attempted to stay true to the fact that **authentically showing up as my full self is a win for all.** 🏳️‍🌈



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raven Jemison is a sports business executive with over 17 years of experience working across the “big four” US sports leagues, including the NBA’s Milwaukee Bucks, the NBA’s League Office, the NFL’s San Francisco 49ers, MLB’s Pittsburgh Pirates and the NHL’s Florida Panthers.

A native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a perennial bottom state in education, a black woman, a queer woman, and the second person in her family to graduate from college, Raven has conquered more than a few obstacles to realizing her success as a minority leader in business.

Though she spends much of her days (and nights) leading a sports organization, Raven’s greatest joy is spending time with her wife, April, and “furbabies”, Sprout, Xander and Peep.



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