

Q & A WITH OTIS LEE

“Why did you write the book?”

From South Boston to Cambridge began as a genealogical narrative for my family. I wanted to give face and a voice to my family members who otherwise would be anonymous. So many people have no idea where they came from or the accomplishments of their ancestors. I believe that to know from “whence one came” is the bedrock of self-esteem. I am often reminded about what Nelson Mandela said about his captivity by the South African authorities, that “they could not break him because he knew he came from a line of kings;” He knew who he was.

The book evolved from this project on genealogy to a David and Goliath saga about my life and overcoming odds, some self-imposed and others systemically imposed. I also thought it useful to share the lessons I learned from the practice of law in Philadelphia and what that was like for me. Finally, I also wanted to debunk stereotypes about black folks as lacking initiative, frugality ethics and the ethos of hard work, love of family and achievement.

“Where did you get the inspiration?”

My first inspiration was the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. I was moved by the losses to the families of 9/11 of their loved ones and the fact that the event was so unexpected that it left the children, most importantly, without a record or a more complete knowledge about their loved ones. The *New York Times* ran a series of short biographies about each victim. I read them and the paucity of information about these people was clearly noticeable to me. So I thought it would be good for me to leave a written record of my life and how I felt about the world for my two sons. I wish that I had had this from my father.

“Who are the main characters?”

Myself, from youth through adulthood, innocent until educated in the ways of the world. My parents, Otis Leonard Lee and Rosa Belle Moon Lee, both educators who taught in black-only schools in the segregated school system of the south. Lang Dixon, a friend and colleague. He was a successful businessman but damaged by his family. Lang aspired to the better things in life but was never quite able to put the whole package together. Wendy Bee, a good friend and one of my anchor clients. Wendy was a hard-working entrepreneur, successful but unable to master the “back office” job of running a business. She was a naturally gifted woman who could have been a surrogate mother if needed.

“Do you think your experiences in the segregated school system of the south hindered your education and ultimately your successes?”

Yes, but not unqualified. The segregated school system did not provide a competitive education. It was systemically designed that way. But the system was comforting. Being around your own people and not in a hostile environment. The segregated system for me at least allowed for my latent talents to be revealed without discouragement. My success, not without trial and tribulation, occurred because I was given a chance and I had the will and the intellectual drive to overcome to succeed notwithstanding the deficits systemically and personally hence the need for black colleges and universities.

“Do you feel your family life helped you or held you back?”

Helped, if not solely responsible, no question. My family life was integral to my success. My parents supported me and made opportunities available to me. They supported me and made the best decisions they could for me based upon their judgment at the time. My parents were always there, they continued to support me in the worst of times and in the best of times. They never wavered. They never lost faith and continued to invest in me. I was raised in a loving and caring close knit family.

“Who should buy your book?”

The people who would buy this book and get something out of it would be those who like the story of the underdog, the “Rudy” type character who would not take “no” for an answer and refused to be broken by a system that sought to destroy him. Seekers of truth would find my book interesting. Folks interested in lifting the veil of ignorance and misconception about a segment of the black community in America that is not the typical story of poverty and ignorance. Those folks interested in knowing what it is like to be middle class and to grow up in America thinking that everything was going to be “alright” if you lived by the rules and played the game the right way, not knowing that the deck was stacked against you: The price of naïveté and the cost of shedding innocence. Those interested in how it is to make it in America as seen through the eyes and experiences of one middle class African-American.

“How do you like the work of a writer as opposed to that of a lawyer?”

At this point in my life, I prefer the work of the writer because it offers solace; it is less stressful. The work of a writer allows for introspection. Looming in the back of a lawyer’s work is the court, the client and Bar. Both jobs require command of the language but writing releases creativity and releases the spirit. You can get off the “beaten path” more freely. Contemplation, introspection, creativity and going down unexpected pathways of discovery nourish the intellect and releases the soul to fly free for the time it last. Writing is indeed very hard work but the psychic rewards are plenty.