

# PREFACE



“**W**hy you talk so white?”

This is a question I was asked many times when I was growing up.

“Why you talk so white?” Now, what kind of a question is that? A poorly constructed one, that’s what.

My parents spent a great deal of energy and time preparing me to succeed in the world without them. One of the lessons they taught me was how to speak “good English.” This meant learning to use good diction, enunciate words clearly, speak succinctly, and project a confident image.

Mom and Dad were African-Americans—Negroes or Colored in their day—who came of age in the United States of America in the 1920s and 1930s. They faced overt racism and sexism, were active in the civil rights movement, and believed strongly that in order for a black person to survive—let alone get ahead in the world—they had to look and sound “acceptable” and be better than “the others.” This terminology was code for “the white man’s world” and “the business world” in their conversations.

Their plans for their one-and-only daughter included going to college and beyond to get a better education than they had. Mom had a two-year secretary certification, and Dad had a four-year college education. Beyond education, I was to either establish a business of my own, join the family business, or establish a career with a mainstream corporation.

Their dreams for me were subsequently met by the 1970s. I graduated from college and continued on to get an advanced degree. I went to work for IBM and built a twenty-year career with that company before leaving to work for another up-and-coming corporation—in its day—called America Online. Then I started my own business, completing my parents' dreams as well as my own. I regret that my father did not live to experience what I know would be his pride in my being in business for myself.

Throughout my formative years, I was asked by my peers—both in school and in my neighborhood—why I “talked so white?” They were, in fact, asking me why I did not talk like they did; why I did not use slang and speak the neighborhood dialect. I was told that I did not “sound black” on the telephone or from a distance when I could not be seen—however “sounding black” was supposed to sound to their ears. Even when I attended the historically black Cheyney State College (now Cheyney University, PA.), I was frequently asked why I “talked so white.”

Now, seriously! You would think that in college, where you are being prepared to face the “real world,” the business world in which one has to mingle, socialize, and otherwise communicate with people of all demographics and socio-economic levels, this question wouldn't be an issue. “Talking white” was simply speaking well and should not have been questioned in a negative way at all. Everyone should have been “talking white” or speaking well.

Throughout the years, I have been struck by how little has changed in this perspective. Today I read about young people who have dreams and goals and strive to do well in school. Yet they feel they have to hide their intelligence for fear of reprisals

from their peers. Some join gangs and later try to break away to move on with their lives, and in doing so, they get hurt or killed in their attempts. I am struck by the struggles that still ensue for those who seek to improve themselves and succeed in life by overcoming tremendous odds, only to be thwarted and derided by their own friends, acquaintances, and families in the process.

I am dismayed by institutions, organizations, and community leaders who criticize the words of prominent people who implore others to take responsibility for their own actions instead of blaming others for their plight.

I am moved to write this book to provide a set of instructions to those who seek to succeed—those who have every right to succeed. I want you to *want* to act on that which will help you reach your goals.

Writing this book also provides the opportunity for me to deliver a kick in the pants to those who seek to justify their own positions in life and feel less threatened by the success of others by seeking to discourage or destroy the aspirations of those who have dreams.

Take from these words what you will. My hope is that this message will cause you to say, “Yes! I knew I was on the right track!” or “So *that’s* why I’m not making the progress I hoped to make—*that’s* what I need to do to get closer to my goals.” If these words teach or inspire just one person, then I have succeeded in my purpose.

I am sure I will anger some readers. So be it. I am not purposefully focusing on one ethnic group in this book. Middle-class, suburban, and white teenagers have adopted the “hip-hop, gangsta” attitudes of the early twenty-first century—the same

attitudes that urban, poverty-level black youth are trying to move away from in their own quests for education, careers, and success. These words are aimed at *any* person who seeks the basics of what it takes to succeed in life. The words are from my perspective. I witness barriers to success almost every day that are self-perpetuated by people who could, with a change in attitude and behavior, achieve more than they ever will if they do not change themselves. I challenge and encourage you to succeed.

*Sylvia Henderson*