

Escaping Your Educational Comfort Zone

By Nikkee Porcaro

I'd resisted it for months. I'd turned my nose up in disdain upon hearing the title. Why would I want any insight into the embodiment of "white trash" stereotypes?

Finally, however, going against my own stubbornness, I picked up J.D. Vance's bestseller "Hillbilly Elegy," a book that was eye-opening not just for its content, but also for its broader application to educational pedagogy as a whole.

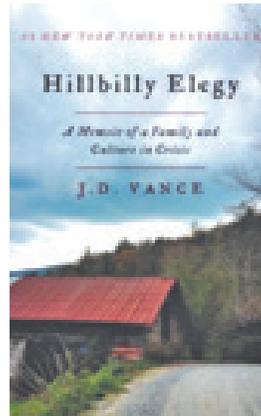
Vance grew up in a dysfunctional, self-proclaimed hillbilly family, with an addict mother and grandparents who were no strangers to solving their problems with fists or guns. "Hillbilly Elegy" doesn't defend or advocate for so-called rednecks, just as it does not castigate or judge. Vance writes in a way that lets the reader come to his or her own conclusions on the policy, culture, and entrenched beliefs of the Appalachian region of the United States.

This isn't a book review, but rather a short retelling of how leaving my literary comfort zone was actually beneficial. You see, as I read on, I started to fidget awkwardly as I saw certain paral-

els to the way I had grown up. Though it wasn't in Appalachia, my upbringing in rural western New Jersey — an area unfamiliar to many, though it sits less than an hour outside Manhattan — seemed to share many of the characteristics Vance described. Parents whose educations stopped with high school. (Check.) Becoming the first child in the family to attain a college degree. (Check.) Domestic violence, and a motto of: "You don't start fights, but you end them." (Check.) Blue-collar jobs and a culturally-specific honor system. (Check.) How was I, a summa-cum-laude-graduating, master's-degree-holding, business-owning lady relating to this ... hillbilly?

But, ultimately, once I got past my initial discomfort, it reminded me of the importance of seeking out viewpoints, classes, and educational opportunities different from our own internal, established cultural paradigm.

In college, I remember facing derision from some in my life for signing up for a class on LGBTQ issues because I didn't identify on that spectrum. "Why would you want to take a class on some-



(SOURCE: HARPERCOLLINS/AMAZON.COM)

thing that has nothing to do with you?" they questioned, wrinkling their noses. Having grown up in possibly the most homogeneous and the least culturally, religiously, or racially-diverse community on the planet, something just snapped inside of me. I desired to know more about people who were considered less.

The class was eye-opening. I learned about Stonewall and the 1970s civil rights movement and the intersectionality of feminism and LGBTQ rights. It led me to actually change my minor to sociology, which worked well in conjunction with my journalism degree. How can you write about people without first understanding them?

As acceptance letters roll in for this year's senior class, I chose to write about

the importance of expanding your educational horizons, because it's almost time to start registering for classes. Yes, there are requirements to meet, but many schools have lists of options to meet those requirements. Consider classes that focus on a different religion, gender, orientation, or lifestyle than the one you're most familiar with. Go crazy and sign up for Cyborg Anthropology (University of Southern California), Tightwaddery: The Good Life on a Dollar a Day (Alfred University), or The Textual Appeal of Tupac Shakur (University of Washington). Consider online options, or at the very least, dare yourself to read a book from a different perspective than yours. You'll develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and above all, a love of education for the sake of education.

You may even realize you have more in common with a formerly alien group than you think. In today's divisive times, that can only bode well for our future.

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