

Waynflete

On Being a Person of Color at Waynflete

By Divya Muralidhara, Middle School Director

My first encounter with Waynflete took place on a worn wooden bench at a Boston-area private school. It was the summer of 2006 and I was attending a week-long diversity workshop with educators from across the United States. Kate Ziminsky, who at that time was a 4-5 teacher, sat beside me and introduced herself, sunlight glinting in her eyes as we talked about our shared love of coastal geography. The air was sweet, and a breeze wafted through the entryway, spooling a set of textured curtains that framed the windows.

The individual I met that day is now a colleague with whom I work daily. As our new curriculum coordinator and lead Seminar teacher in Middle School, Kate and I collaborate, share stories, strategize, and reflect upon our shared practice in ways I could not have imagined thirteen years ago.

Along with Nancy Tabb, Laurel Daly, and former colleagues Amanda Lackey and Marion Knox, Kate shared a lot about Waynflete values during that first encounter in Massachusetts. They always invited me to join them at meals. They sat next to me and asked me how I was doing. By the end of the week, I felt like I was part of their group—that there was always a seat waiting for me to occupy if I chose it. As I perused the job listings later that summer, I recalled those gestures of welcome that had made such a lasting impression on me. In fact, Laurel was the person I called about the opening I had spotted at Waynflete. I smiled broadly as she whispered into the phone, “Yes, apply!” in response to my question about the Middle School Director opening. I wanted to work with these people!

I had many questions about living in Maine after I was offered the job in January 2007, and less than 24 hours to make a decision. Leading up to that moment, however, I had had several weeks of time and the opportunity to learn all that I could about living and working in Maine as a person of color. Waynflete offered me much of the information I needed, including a list of cultural organizations and a group of brochures and listings. I was happy to discover that there was an Indian grocery store in South Portland where I could buy fresh samosas and coriander chutney. During my day-long visit, every member of the search committee pronounced my name correctly—the

first time!—having heard me say it during the phone interview, and checked in with me to make sure that I had eaten something every few hours.

Once hired, I received a green and white tote bag monogrammed with my nickname, “Div,” and filled with various items I would need to survive winters in Maine. The climate was as much of a deterrent for me as the diversity I would need to seek and cultivate in my new home. I hoped I would never have the opportunity to use the Yaktrax (I have since replaced them three times).

What have I discovered? First, Waynflete is my home within greater Portland, a place where I am encouraged to speak and to listen, to share my voice and perspective, to lead and to learn every day. To work and live within a two-block radius is another choice that my husband and I made in the weeks leading up to our move. We live on a smaller scale, renting the second floor of a house in a West End duplex, from which we can walk to the Portland Museum of Art and I can stock up on ingredients at Sun Oriental Market. The fact that the city is so compact, relative to our former home in Washington, D.C., remains part of its appeal.

What is hard? I feel my otherness, my brown-ness, in this state more than other places. I am more aware of my skin color and my racial identity than I have been at other phases of my life. Living in my skin is a daily experience and reality that no amount of reading or research can replicate. At times I feel compelled to name my experience directly in order to advance a conversation and deepen our own work on behalf of students. While I am generally uncomfortable claiming authority based on my identity and personal outlook, I also know that my experience of often being in the minority is important to articulate. Otherwise, we just make assumptions.

In our Middle School this year, we have begun using common language to frame the experience of being in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. These three tenets—what we call “the three Cs”—are also the core elements of our dialogue work across the school: Curiosity, Care, and Courage. In looking back on my twelve years at the school, and as a person of color living in a majority white state, the three Cs have served me well and were evident from my very first encounter with Waynflete. I felt the interest of others, who asked questions and engaged me in conversation. My Waynflete colleagues cared for me by bringing me a cup of tea and inviting me to join them at meals. I experienced courage on both sides of the table—the kind of openness, conviction, and candor that allow for dialogue and a sense of belonging to emerge in enduring ways. Learning with these colleagues, side by side, has always been what I

value most about the school from that first encounter to the present day, when a student left a note on my desk saying “thank you” for being kind to her in a difficult moment. We share what we know, with compassion, and we learn and grow from the stories of others.

Recent collegial conversations have focused on “Windows and Mirrors,” the ways that our texts and our class discussions must both reflect and offer a diversity of perspective. I am proud that I can offer both a window and a mirror to my students, colleagues, and community as a person of color at Waynflete.