



## SEASON 1, EPISODE 2

It was January 2008, I excitedly stepped onto my campus, MY CAMPUS, as the new principal of an Elementary School. It was a dream come true literally. I couldn't wait to work with the staff, students, and families that I had heard so many great things about. When the first family night came, I was giddy with excitement. Proudly sporting my burgundy cougar pride polo shirt (you know, those ultra fashionable ones that all school staff have), I set out across the inner courtyard to meet my families. I locked eyes with a dad standing with his kindergartener - a little guy who I had just met earlier that day during a class visit - I headed straight over to introduce myself to the dad, so I could share about my meeting his son earlier in the day and tell him how excited I was to be a part of their school community. So I stuck out my hand, "Hi, I'm Ilesha Graham. The new principal." At first the dad looked perplexed, then his face hardened. And sticking his hands in his pocket, he said "Really? You? I thought Affirmative Action hires were illegal."

Whoa!! Crushed doesn't even begin to explain what I felt. And I was embarrassed, as other parents turned around at his words. I had no response and as I felt my face get hot and my eyes get wet, I turned on my heels and

simply walked away. Because despite how rude he was, I didn't have the privilege of meeting fire with fire.

I sat in my office later, alone in the dark, my office with the big desk and my name and title on the door, the office I had dreamed about having . . .with his word reverberating through my head. Affirmative Action hire. In other words, you're only here to meet a quota, not because you're qualified.

I looked around my office at my family photos, and my framed degrees (with an S), and my posted awards. Affirmative Action hire.

My mind wandered back to the days of my childhood - the young daughter of two hip and cool parents whose 60's parties turned into something much more tragic by the 80's. The adolescent girl who had to raise her younger sister. The homeless teen who realized that the only stable thing in her life was school and her only ticket out would be her education. The 17 year old who received a full academic scholarship to a top research university, despite all the bricks that had been stacked up against her. The young single mother who had been on welfare - shopping with food stamps and WIC vouchers in the middle of the night so as to not get the eye roll, teeth sucking, loud sighs, and judgmental stares from others behind her in line, but yet who still graduated from college with her daughter literally on her hip. The woman who earned multiple credentials and her master's degree who vowed to give back to the field of education because it had given her so much. The educator who was recognized as one of the youngest and most successful administrators in her county and yet, her principalship was an Affirmative Action hire. Nothing had ever been handed to her, gifted to her, or been easy for her and yet Affirmative Action hire.

And so I sat there, a grown woman in a dark office, behind a big desk, with my name and title on the door, and I cried.

Oooh!! That was a rough day, to say the least! It was also the day I decided I was no longer going to hide behind the moniker of "CoCo" on the internet. I was no longer going to be Ilesha in my professional life and separately be CoCo, the speaker, in another life.

I realized that while I was using "CoCo" to prevent people in my "professional" life from knowing all the hard details of my "personal" life. It didn't really matter. People were going to talk, judge, assume, and create their own stories about me anyway. And I needed to care a WHOLE LOT LESS! I also needed to stop giving other people's opinions that much power over my life. I needed to stop being concerned about what they were thinking about me. I'm sure you've heard the saying "everyone has an opinion and they're just like, well you know, we all have one and they all stink."

But seriously, and even more importantly, it was in that moment that something finally clicked inside of me. Now, I have to tell you, as an aside. I'm a Jesus girl! And if you're not, that's cool I still love ya and you're welcome here. But I tell you that because being a Jesus Girl shapes and frames and guides how I live my life.

So, there's a bible passage that says, "We are overcomers by the blood of the lamb and the words of our testimony." And while I had overcome A LOT. I wasn't really fully living the abundant, overcoming, life of freedom that I was

promised, because up until that point I was still trying to separate myself from my story, separate my test from my testimony.

And that night, I said 'NO MORE". Because not only did I want to be completely free, I also wanted to help give other young women the courage to keep on shining brightly, even when others were trying to steal their light. And in order to do that, I had to fully embrace all of me.

I wish I could say that was the last comment like that that I received in my career, but it wasn't. It was just the last time that I let it affect me like that!

One of the best lessons that I've learned is this: there is nothing that people can say that can stop your destiny. It might hurt your feelings, but it won't stop your destiny. Let me repeat that one more time. I want to make sure that you get it. There is NOTHING that people can say that can stop your destiny. It might hurt your feelings, but it won't stop your destiny. And in this life, we gotta be destiny minded!

So, let them say what they will. YOU just keep walking that path the you've been ordained to walk. There will always be doubters, haters and naysayers, and then there will be you - just killin the game! You've got this and God's got you!

And if you need a little reminder, hope over to my website and grab the graphic that I have for you! You can find it at [www.cocospeaks.net/episode03](http://www.cocospeaks.net/episode03)

Join me on the next episode when I tell you about that time I lost the spelling bee with a four letter word.

Can't wait too see you back here!

You just bring the cup and I'll bring the perfect pour of whatever you need.

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