

Q: As someone who has lived her whole life in the City of Poughkeepsie, what's an important insight about the place?

A: Poughkeepsie is a conglomerate of all sorts of families and relations. So in the sense of six degrees of separation, it's really a one-and-a-half of a person association among its residents. Certain clusters of families, whether they're Italian or African-American or Latino or whatever, have come into this 4.5 square miles of a city, and the next thing you know somebody's related to somebody or crossed paths with someone else through work or school.

As an educator here in the city, I have found myself to be extremely conscious of who might be one of my fifth grade students. They may or may not be related to me, but they may be related to a person I know from my many experiences.

Q: I understand that several generations of your family have lived in the City of Poughkeepsie. How would you like to introduce them?

A: On my mother's side of the family, we were actually featured in 2004 in the Poughkeepsie Journal for its one hundred-and- fiftieth anniversary, as a family then which had five generations living in the city, from my great-grandmother to my son. It showed that generations have been able to thrive here.

My great-grandmother was one of the first generation out of slavery, born in the early 1900s. She had twenty children, at a time when African Americans couldn't go to any hospitals. Move on to my grandmother who had seven children, my mother who had three, and then myself I had one. Here I sit, if you will, one of my family's legacies. Their commitment to our character development, and to our formal and informal education, shows in many of us.



Shanna Didymus pq&a

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Q: Do you have siblings?

A: I do. I have four brothers who grew up in the City of Poughkeepsie with me. I'm second from the oldest. As the only girl, I've loved on my brothers big time. I feel like the sibling love is still real between us.

Q: Who else was in your household growing up?

A: My mother had my older brother and I by the time she was twenty, then later one of my younger brothers. I also grew up with aunts and uncles on my mother's side. They were all younger than my mother and were more like siblings to me. All of these people strongly influenced my character.

Q: So your mother was a single parent from pretty early on?

A: Correct. In light of the conversation about single parenthood and its correlation with the City of Poughkeepsie, I've heard many people, including colleagues from different backgrounds, articulate a theme of, "Oh, that's just like Poughkeepsie, children raising children, babies having babies." That's one of the first stereotypes my spirit had to adjust to, when I listened to folks from outside Poughkeepsie categorize the residents this way, as if we did not value education or aspire to advance our life's experiences. I happen to be one of the only people where I teach [Warring Elementary School], and one of the few in the Poughkeepsie City School District, who has a doctorate, and that was before I was 42. I am also associated with many other Poughkeepsie natives who have earned a doctorate or master's, who live around the world. Therefore, my mother having her children at a young age was not a negative precursor of how successful we would be in the future. Actually, it was part of our motivation to pursue success.

This is one of those humongous assumptions and myths, that City of Poughkeepsie people have low standards, or low expectations of their children. I don't know *that* Poughkeepsie.

I reflect on my great-grandmother's journey. Even though she had limitations in terms of how much education she was able to acquire, there was never a question from her to me about how to continue on and find the value of education, whenever you got it.

Life happens. If you have a child you return to school when you can, you continue on with your life and with advancing yourself for you and your family, you stand on your own two feet. This sense of was passed on through males and females, and there are many of us generationally in my family who are professionals.

Q: Is working amidst these kinds of stereotypes a big struggle for you, as someone who grew up in the city and attended its schools?

A: At times it has been. However, I have also seen it as an opportunity to encourage a different perspective. Many of my colleagues in the district come from somewhere else. Over the years, as a colleague, I've had to ask different ones not to pity the young people in the city, or to think that they're trying to save their students from themselves and their families. This would be a disservice to the children, and it's disrespectful. I'm a call to consciousness kind of person. I have had to say to some colleagues over the years, something to the effect of, "If our district's socioeconomic concerns are not in line with yours, then perhaps there's a need for you to consider working elsewhere." I have also loved working with many of my colleagues who are committed to our students' success, no matter the student's personal story. Hopefully, we can continue to have real conversations so we can all serve our children with the integrity they deserve.

Q: Is there any receptivity to your views from colleagues in the school district? Has your school or the district heeded you in any way?

A: To be honest with you, there has been some receptivity from colleague to colleague. Our district has a long way to go in consistently offering professional development on the topic of the socioeconomic concerns and demographic profile of our district. I raised this matter in a recent dialogue with a retired veteran teacher. And they stated that from their experiences, there had never been formal and consistent professional development to dispel negative stereotypes that loom in our community. So we could definitely benefit from such efforts.

Q: Given your history as a student and now a longtime educator in the district, how do you view the creation of the Spackenkill School District that removed so many students from the city district with more affluent backgrounds?

A: It wasn't just the impact on the school district, it was on our whole city community. It defined socioeconomic differences and cultural differences between the two communities. Many years ago folks who worked at the hospitals or IBM decided that they wish to have their children educated in a separate community.

Which reminds me of a conversation a while back with a colleague, one of my veteran mentors. She said, "I think at this point the city school district should be shut down and the children should go everywhere else." And I said they should not, because the children should not feel a negative impact directly or indirectly for how their school district is performing in comparison to nearby districts. We, the Poughkeepsie City School District, should continue to solicit the collaboration of all stakeholders...students, parents, school administrators, community leaders, business people, and others...to continue developing a high-performing district.

Q: Where did you live growing up?

A: We started out briefly at the Poughkeepsie Housing Authority apartments on Smith Street. Then we were on South Avenue for a few years, and in a few different homes on North Clinton Street near College Hill Park. At one time I was even bused from the

Smith Street apartments to the other side of town to integrate the Krieger Elementary School, near the Town of Poughkeepsie. I remember that time very well because that was when my mother decided to keep me back a year in school. She realized I had dyslexia, and she worked with my second grade teacher to come up with strategies to help me succeed. I mention this because children may have academic deficits or other things they need help with, but it doesn't mean they won't be successful. I'm Dr. Didymus today.

Back then, I was afraid of words, of speaking out loud, of communicating, whether it was books or writing anything, because I knew the words would look like gobbledy-gook after a while. Or I might have trouble making sure words sounded the way I knew in my head they should sound, when I read them aloud. That was part of my motivation for where I am today. I often say to my students, it's ok, this is a learning stage, this is what you're supposed to be doing. Whatever that "it" is for you, it's not a reason to stop, it doesn't have to slow you down, you want to use it as your motivation. You may even face discouragement. But remain encouraged and focused anyway.

Q: As a child what were your favorite fun things to do, and places to be, in the city?

A: College Hill Park was our backyard when we lived on North Clinton. Back then we had a wooden playground unit that looked like a pirate ship, where you could do all sorts of climbing, do the monkey bars, do the tire swing, stand on top and look through a telescope and turn the ship's wheel. You knew you had earned your stripes as a kid if you got a splinter from that unit, or you got a skid on your leg from the concrete when you ran and your shoe got caught in the gravel. We played so many games there, the park was thriving. On a weekend day or a summer day someone in the neighborhood would say, "We're gonna meet at the park at 10:00." And if somebody didn't show up, we'd go by their house and ask if they could come out and play. If we found out they had to do their chores first, we'd say, "Can we come in to help them do their chores?"

There was very little drama, and gang-related concerns. There were also a lot of different activities for everyone in the city, including things organized by the various cultural clubs. The Italian Center was thriving, and there were community opportunities and experiences there. Same with the Irish Club. There was RiverFest, with all sorts of different vendors and entertainers. Fairs would come in and out of town.

We used to walk to the Adriance Library, and we knew that the YMCA was right there in front of the library and it was open. When the YMCA closed that was a big blow to us.

There was always swimming in the summertime at the Pulaski and Spratt public pools, usually Pulaski for me because we were on the north side of town. We would ride bikes and our skateboards throughout the city visiting friends and family members. We'd go to a community football or baseball game at Stitzel Field, or basketball at Harriet Tubman (Hulme) Park. Someone would be there that you knew, or a relative lived nearby and that would be a safe house to go to. You could check in to wash up and ask for a drink, and call Mom to say when you would be home.



Photo by

Shanna Didymus and

Q: You said you were a tomboy with four brothers around. Did you play sports?

A: Yes! I mostly played sports in the neighborhood. I also roller-skated a lot up and down the street. I didn't get a chance to play team sports because like a lot of kids, once my younger brother was born I had to keep an eye on him when Mom went to work. Whether it was a younger sibling or cousin, we shared the responsibility of our younger family members.

Q: You have four educational degrees: associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate. You talked about the impact of the older women in your life, and their wisdom. Were they the most important influence in making education such a priority?

A: They were extremely influential. But I would be remiss if I didn't say that

men equally had an effect in the family and on my encouragement. Unfortunately, what has happened is that our men have either moved away or passed away earlier than our women. We knew that once employers like IBM, the state [psychiatric] hospital, and the train station either hired fewer people or closed, it was a message to many of our men that Poughkeepsie wasn't a place for them to grow professionally, therefore many of them moved away from the area. However, the importance of education influenced my older brother who lives in China today. He's retired from the military in his 40s, has completed his bachelor's and master's degrees, and is also teaching. One of my younger brothers lives in Indiana, and he's preparing to teach graphic design and 3-D

printing online. Another brother is a physical fitness educator in Florida, and my fourth brother recently graduated from Mount St. Mary's College with an English degree.

Q: What about your father?

A: He's still in the community. My father and his parents celebrated our personal and academic milestones all of our lives. Both of these grandparents are educated people. There's a lot of generational and gender balance in my spirit. When I was growing up I chose to sit among the elder women and men, because we can learn from past generations' choices and decisions, and then hopefully make wiser ones. I took on that consciousness, and while my friends were off playing and doing whatever, I was saying, "Mom, I'm going to Great-Gramma's house," or "Mom, I'm going to Grandma and Grandpa's house," or "Mom, I'm going to uncle so-and-so's house." I would walk across town and hang out for an hour or two.

Q: Why do you think you chose that compared to other kids?

A: I'll be honest, part of it is that I didn't like getting in trouble. When children start to get bored they can make silly or inappropriate choices. Back then, when I would ask myself, "What can I do to stay out of trouble?," an easy answer was, "I can go to a relative's house." The other part was that I simply enjoyed the company and energy of my elders.

Q: From various things you've said, it's clear that your extended family has been crucial to your life experience in the City of Poughkeepsie. Are there other memories or thoughts about this that stand out?

A: College Hill was a great gathering place for our families. We would walk to the structure at the top, that we called the white house. Families would also line up cars around there. The adults would do things like play cards, while the kids played around them or lower down in the park.

Everybody knew [College Hill] was a place where friends and family could come together. We could blast our music and have fun and relax and make sure everybody knew where everybody's babies were, almost like a family reunion every week.

Backyard barbecues at different folks houses every week were a norm when the weather was warm enough. Regardless of folks' religion, or their profession, or their work schedule, people could take off their professional hats to enjoy company with family and friends. We had some family trips when Mom's time allowed it. If a relative was traveling they would take the kids along. That's a big way the community helped raise us. I was blessed to be able to have that.