

DON'T FIST BUMP MICHELLE

“Come on in, honey. What are you waiting for?”

The speaker, a black lady in a blue uniform, is standing at the “Priority” entrance for airport security. Priority is for people flying first class or people who are riding in wheel chairs, but occasionally older people are allowed to go through. Today is my day. I thank her, walk on in, slip off my shoes, remove my belt, and empty my pockets. Little does this lady know that this 68-year-old balding guy is heading for the White House.

Once my shoes and possessions have made it through the X ray machine, I suit up and head down the hall to Gate 17B to wait for United flight 421, the jumbo jet that will fly me and a student to Washington to receive an award. I’m early, of course. I’m always early.

At the gate I wait for LaCreshia. My traveling companion. She is a member of Young Chicago Authors, the organization receiving the award. I have never met her, though, because these days, I visit the YCA office only occasionally. But, even though I don’t know her, the staff wants her to represent us, and I respect their decisions

But where is she?

I ask various black girls, “Are you LaCreshia?” and they say no. One is listening to her iPod and I half shout, “ARE YOU LACRESHIA?” and she shouts back “NO I AM NOT.”

I sit down and read the paper. The President thinks that teachers whose students perform well on state tests should be paid more than teachers whose kids don’t do so well. “Bad idea, Barrack.” I say to myself. “Pay more attention to teachers who motivate. And speaking of motivation, do you really think money will motivate good teachers?”

Departure time nears; I’m getting nervous, If LaCreshia misses this, she’ll miss meeting the First Lady who will be handing out this Coming Up Taller

Award. I should have picked her up and driven her. It was stupid of me to think she could figure out the world's largest airport.

A young black lady with a leather brief case hurries up. Are you LaCreshia? She sweeps past me, but behind her is a younger girl in jeans, and a baseball cap and carrying a book bag. "Hi, Bob." LaCreshia is in the house.

We hop in line, and before long we're squeezing into our seats and snapping on the safety belts.

She's never flown before. When the flight attendant talks about safety, she actually listens. She even takes out the magazine and looks at the diagram of the plane to see where the emergency exits are.

Once we're settled in, I ask her one more time. "Are you sure you've never flown? Never ever?"

"Never."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

We banter about YCA. She knows all about our magazine, but not so much about the Saturday program and events like our Poetry Festival in the winter. We look at the brochure and laugh at the staged pictures of grinning kids from every possible ethnic group. She asks me if the numbers are right. For example, we say that 98 % go on to college. I say they are a little high, but that's the sort of thing that happens. Funders like numbers. Groups are always claiming that the reading scores of their participants have climbed "dramatically."

Actually LaCreshia, who graduated high school with a GED, is not in college. She started at an interior design program at a local art school, but quit. She lives off and on with several relatives and as far as I can tell has no money. She helps run our magazine and writes articles. In the last issue she had one article about homelessness.

The flight is bump free. The landing at Reagan is smooth. (Though LaCreshia does clutch the vomit bag) A few minutes later we are in a cab and heading for the Madison Hotel. "Where are you from?" the driver asks. "Chicago. How about you?"

“Guess.”

“Lebanon?”

“Further East.”

“Pakistan?”

“Bingo.”

I roll down the window to let in the balmy Washington air. This would be a good day for a long walk. We cross the Potomac and pass the Washington Monument and a few other places. I haven't been here for years and have forgotten it all. The city feels open and available. Wide streets. A good place to navigate.

The Madison Hotel is near Thomas Circle named after the Union general who won the Battle of Nashville. It is smallish but not tiny. It's a Lowes Hotel so it can't be a fleabag. We get our room keys and learn that we are to go to an orientation meeting at 3:00 PM. That gives us an hour to rest. LaCreshia heads to her room and I hang out in the lobby, where I see a person I know named Terry Blackhawk. She founded and runs a writing program in Detroit for high school kids. It's called Citywide Poets and modeled after Young Chicago Authors. “You guys just keep going,” she says to me. “You must be awfully proud.”

I am proud I tell her. I never thought it would last for almost twenty years. I tell her that we still have a Saturday program and a magazine and a schools program. I tell her we're struggling for money like all not-for-profits. No need to mention some of the more unpleasant developments in the past year.

I go up to the room for a quick snooze and then back again for Orientation in the Montpelier Room. Orientation is the perfect word. First we become orientated with the 14 award winning out-of-school programs that introduce underprivileged youth to the arts. We each stand up and say who we are, what we do, and how long we've been doing it. Some groups likes ours are for writing; others for dance, music, and painting. Some are connected directly to museums or universities. Many work with professional artists. People don't talk too long. When you know what you're doing, you can sum it up quickly. The young people -- like LaCreshia -- are even more to the point. Along with 15 groups from

America there were groups from China, Mexico, and Egypt. Like the US programs these foreign programs offer opportunities in the arts.

Once we have learned about each other, the assistant director of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities tells us, in no uncertain terms, what we need to know about the next twenty-four hours. Today we should be in the lobby by 5:00 PM in "Business Attire." From there we'll take a bus to the Kennedy Center for a Gala Reception and a short program. There will be drinks, appetizers and a chance to talk with each other and with people from various government's arts agencies. Picture taking as allowed. The program will include short speeches from important people and a performance. After that, back to the hotel for dinner in the John Adams' Room. This lady is precise and direct and serious. A woman in charge. Every one in the room is utterly attentive to what she was saying. I can't recall ever being in such a focused atmosphere. No yawning or whispering or nodding off. No rolling of the eyes.

Tomorrow, she continues even more forcefully, we will meet at 11:30 AM for the bus to the White House. Business attire. Photo IDs. At the White House, we'll find our places in the auditorium and rehearse our moves. Each winner and student will be invited up on stage one at a time to receive the plaque and then walk to the other side of the stage to shake hands with the First Lady and pose for picture. No chatting with the first lady. No hugging. Last year someone fist bumped Laura Bush and that was bad. Very bad. Fist bumping the First Lady is bad,

All of this is probably necessary. Ceremonies at the White House should flow smoothly. They should leave good memories. No one should be embarrassed. But still it seems a little odd that people who have won this award are treated like children.

Afterwards we talk to some people from Providence, Rhode Island. Their program, which is called New Urban Arts, introduces young people to many different arts. They do this by collaborating with schools and museums. Their director used to work for us. They are delighted to be there, but wonder why the

whole ceremony will be barely 35 minutes long. "You'd think," one of them complains, "that they could stretch it out."

Kennedy Center feels huge because it is huge. It's plenty big enough for frisbee or touch football. We have 30 minutes or so to stroll through it before going upstairs to the Terrace for the Gala. Most people pause at the bust of JFK and study the photos of his career. LaCreshia walks fast and then stops abruptly to gaze at a painting or a piece of sculpture. She asks lots of questions. "Why didn't JFK go the March on Washington?" Good question. I don't have an answer.

The appetizer part of the Gala goes quickly. The young people pretend to like the tiny, meatless tooth-picked snacks.

At the performance we sit with a husband and wife from Mexico. They helped fund the Mexican program that is receiving an award. The first speaker is from the National Endowment for the Arts; the next is from The National Endowment for the Humanities; the third of from the President's Commission for Arts and Humanities. They are, without exception, attractive, articulate and to the point. We got this award, they tell us, because we value the arts. We believe that everyone deserves the arts in a democracy. Arts humanize. Arts are a great companion for life.

All these remarks are just what I expected, but I still find them convincing and I bet the others do too because we do believe our work has value for everyone involved. Unlike Ayn Rand, whose biographies have recently been released, we think there is more to the good life than selfish pursuit. We are, a cynical friend once said, "unapologetic NPR do-gooders." So be it.

The welcoming talks are followed by a poetry reading from a Detroit girl and then a drum performance from a Boston group called Express Yourselves. Twelve high school kids in black tee shirts with histories of mental illness create more noise with their drums than I have heard in a long time. And since we are sitting near the stage, the sound is deafening, but enjoyable. All of us politically correct do gooders get into it by clapping along. The Mexican lady looks bewildered. Is this all they do? She whispers to me. I shrug.

Dinner back at the hotel in the John Adams Room is subdued. I talk with a lady from Houston. Her program links the Houston Art Museum with several youth agencies. What she describes makes me think about other ways YCA could work directly with writing organizations in the city. We could form more partnerships with universities, publishing houses, and magazines. Food for thought to go along with the roast beef and cherry pie.

Meanwhile, LaCreshia is working the crowd. She has befriended the drummers, the kids from Detroit, and some dancers. Earlier she introduced me to a lady from New Mexico who works with incarcerated youth. LaCreshia has invited them all to our poetry slam in February. She promises to send them SAY WHAT, our magazine. Her career as a networker just might be starting today.

The bus ride to the White House is smooth -- how could it not have been? At the gate, an FBI agent with a dog checks out the bottom of the bus. Once out of the bus we stand in line waiting to go through security. For security we do not have to take off our shoes. Once through security, we walk up the sidewalk to the White House. The lawn is well mowed. No crab grass. The house is white and large but not large like a palace. The front hall is full of people, including several Marine guards. We walk down the hall to the State Dining Room, which is set up with three hundred gold chairs facing a small stage.

We find our places on the right. The other half is for guests. Once we have our places, we have time to take pictures and look around the room, and that's what we do. LaCreshia has her picture taken dozens of times. Cameras everywhere.

But then as the time approaches, a strange thing happens: Without being ordered to, we all take our seats and sit silently. The only sounds come from the guests on the other side. Silence has taken over. Something important is about to happen and we want to be alert for it. There is no real tension since no one has to speak. It is something else. Even though the ceremony will last barely thirty minutes and even though our organizations might not be all that they are cracked up to be and even though the brochures feature posed pictures of ridiculously happy kids and even though YCA is struggling and even though the

President is obsessed with test scores, and even though there would be four more events in this room today, and even though, it's all kind of silly, it still is pretty cool.

And when the First Lady is announced and strides to the podium and gives a short talk praising our efforts, we are totally alert just as we are when we walk up to the stage to get the plaque and cross the stage to shake her hand and pose for the picture.