I’ve never been ignorant of the fact that being black in a town that is overwhelming white means I “stick out”. I also know that since I was a well mannered, highly ambitious African American young man that, for some reason, I stood out more, as if I were some kind of endangered species. At the age of 14 I understood all this, but found it more humorous than anything else. At that age I did not care about being a different skin color I just wanted to be like everyone around me and have fun. For the most part that’s what I did.

Most the fun to be had at that time came from Friday nights at the teen center, where friends and I played basketball and had tournaments that are referred by local adults, usually parents. One Friday night as the teen was whining down, my friends and I were waiting outside for our parents to come pick us up to head home. As we waited we heard the heard the rumbling of footsteps rushing toward the door from the inside, not before long a group of kids came running out and heading straight fro the street. Having no clue as to what happened my friends and I began laughing.

Our laugher was soon drowned out by the roar of the door once again being slammed open; our childish smiles were melted away by the angry gaze of one of the parent volunteers from inside who looked less like the goofy grey mustached referee from an hour ago and more like a furious junkyard dog on the hunt.

We stood their speechless. The man was the first to break the silence.

“You boys better give me whatever you stole”.

We said nothing

“Look I’m not kidding with you boys give us the shoes you stole”.

Still nothing. Just my thoughts: does he really think we stoles something? was it because we were black?

Finally I could no longer just stand there as he attempting to subdue us with his glare. I calmly and respectfully explained that we have no idea what he was talking bout and haven’t stole anything. He said nothing .

I again repeated, “ sir we’ve been out here for about twenty minutes waiting to be-”

“- don’t sir me, this isn’t ‘show time’ at the Apollo, this isn’t comic view, I’m not kidding give me the shoes”

It was clear from that comment, the only basis of his accusation was that we were all black. It was also clear, by the furrowed brows and clinched fists of my friends that they recognized it too. The smiles and laughter that dominated the atmosphere just minutes ago were now overshadowed by the growing tension. I knew that if something rational was not done the situation would only get worse.

Once again I tried to explain our case, but it fell upon deaf ears; with both sides full of anger I saw no other solution then just leaving and arranging to be picked up down street.

The following week at the teen center I was a little nervous. I knew we did nothing wrong but I had not idea what type of response there might be before the basketball tournament. I knew that regardless I would need to maintain my respect for my adult, even if they compare my argument to B.E.T. standup.

That night as I got ready to play the referee walked up to me and simply apologized and referred to my respect and manners as being “refreshing”

Although I’ll never know for sure I believe that what I did the night of the conflict let to the best case scenario. I was able to avoid a real conflict and I believe gain the respect of another person in my community.