

Growing up in the South exposed me to numerous instances of racism and lack of diversity. My parents were born in the 1930s and believed they were not racist; how could they be with friends like "black" Eddie and "Mexican" George? The very act of referring to someone by their skin color or ethnicity made them racist. When called out, "that is just who they are" or "it's common for their generation" was a widely accepted excuse for racism, micro-aggression, and hurtful behavior. My father told me early on that if I ever brought a "black girl" home, I should just not come home. Additionally, this statement assumes that my orientation and preference should be that of a woman and that being straight and cis-gendered was the only option. My parents were not "bad" people but did terrible and hurtful things through their ignorance and actions.

Early in my life, I believed that not seeing color, ethnicity, or orientation and that we are "all people and should embrace our humanity" was safe, easy, and not hurtful. Little did I know how hurtful and offensive that was. At the time, I believed that by making us all the "same," I was not being racist and not expressing micro-aggressions to those around me who were different from me. I did not understand that I minimized and marginalized them by whitewashing their existence. Thankfully that has changed, and I learned the importance and found the appreciation to seek out, embrace and respect those beautiful things that make us diverse and unique.

My name is Todd Edwards. I am a privileged straight, cis-gendered white male from Atlanta, Georgia, an area known for its historical racism, inequity, and lack of DEI in the South. The previous statement was uncomfortable to read and for me to share. I do not intend it to be disrespectful or hurtful. I share it in the context of an explanation of who I am, my personal DEI journey, and where I stand on racial equity and DEI. While I have worked extremely hard to be where I am today and am proud of my accomplishments, my privilege has opened doors for me and provided opportunities I may not have had under other circumstances. Though my privileged status doesn't undermine my hard work and success, it allows me to see how that privilege has aided my journey as an artist, educator, and, ultimately, a human being.

I have acknowledged my ignorance, assumptions, and lack of understanding and pledged myself to be an advocate and ally. I want to help those less privileged than me by breaking down barriers, providing opportunities, and having the difficult conversations needed to do this vital work. I have participated in numerous workshops and DEI initiatives related to the arts, education, and entertainment industries. Through my teaching and pedagogy, I strive to educate and prevent cultural appropriation in design and production. During my time at St. Olaf College, I have taken part in a pilot program for DEI within our International and Off-Campus Studies Program, attended Nicole Brewer's (founder of the Anti Racist Theatre Movement) *Conscious Theatre Training* workshop, and assisted in the creation and implementation of our Theater Department's DEI statement and practices. I have prioritized involvement in United Scenic Artist 829, IATSE's, and USITT's DEI initiative programs around mentoring and diversifying the entertainment industry. I understand that I have benefitted from my privilege and strive to help bring an end to racism, micro-aggressive actions, disrespect, and injury to those different from me. I am happy seeing others "see themselves" in the industry, the classroom, and the world. I believe that it is essential that we create safe spaces to explore creativity and embrace our unique and diverse world.