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Man down! Man down!
A Tribute to Our Fallen Soldiers

Although the voice of Anderson Cooper was still very audible in the background, that was all his voice was, background noise. The room became silent and the sound of raindrops became louder. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I sat down watching the news, alone, as I always do. “What are you following me for,” he screamed as he fearfully put his hands up. A hoodie, a pack of skittles, and green tea were his only weapons, but that did not matter. In a blink of an eye, there was a shot straight through his chest. The melanin he inherited was the only threat. He was a moving target in this neighborhood anyway; he was always just as good as dead. Nevertheless, my God, it was still a man down. *A 5’11”, 17-year-old, unarmed, black man down.*

I sat silently, in awe, thinking about what had just occurred. I thought about my little brother, and our very own “wrong neighborhood.” I was 16 years old, and I was in tears. I was confused, scared, and disheartened. For the first time in my life, I remember thinking it was “them” against “us.” I remember asking, “Why do they hate us?” and I remember being told not to get “too passionate about social justice issues.” So I pulled myself together. College was around the corner anyway, and it was going to be an exciting time, or so I thought.

Confined in the yellow walls of my social justice classes, I learned about the injustices perpetuated against people of color. I was constantly looked at to be the liberating voice of *my people*, and I was on edge every time black history was discussed. As one of the four black girls in a dorm of over 300, I became aware that my culture and

background were drastically different from many of my university peers. I wasn't even African American; I was just black. African. Nigerian to be exact. It was then that I began to notice that I did not feel a sense of belonging. It was then that I realized I did not belong at Madison, and to put an icing on the cake, it happened again a couple of years later.

Here I was, drinking my daily cup of French vanilla coffee as I watched the news in silence. I had so many questions. I agree, lifting the cigarillos was a bad idea, but when did shoplifting warrant the attention of a lone-wolf firing squad? Even after he fearfully threw his hands up. I wanted to know, if he looked anything like you, would you have put him down with 12 bullets? Were the cigarillos worth the life you took with no remorse? I remember thinking, "Man, they just keep killing us and no one cares." I watched the protests, riots, and open interpretation of the events. I watched Fox News express white privilege by blaming black America for the killings, and I watched Don Lemon unsuccessfully try to relate to the rest of black America. *Man down*, I thought. *It's a 6'4", 18-year-old, unarmed, black man down...* and still, no one cared.

The murders happened again and again: Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and Sarah Bland. Their deaths resulted in paid leaves and no convictions for the officers. I had run out of tears, anger and despair; all that was left was fear. Fear for African American and black students who were just 4 percent of the JMU student body in 2013. Fear for my two brothers, for my dad, and for myself. I was hopeless, until something revolutionary happened. A small group of students decided it was time to change the world, and in making this decision, they helped changed my world.

As I walked away from Carrier Library on a bright sunny day, I saw something that brought my tears back. It was a group of white *and black* students linking arms walking through the Commons chanting, “Hands up don’t shoot!” There were posters, there were students, and there was awareness. There were allies and love, and most importantly, there was empathy. There were people who saw injustice and unlike me, figured out way to speak against it. As the tears of joy fell down my face, I immediately joined their chant and I felt more empowered than I had ever been. They were paying a tribute to our fallen soldiers, and the pain and fear of the black community were just as much theirs as they were mine. When the day was over, it actually hit me. I had found people who cared enough to speak out against injustice, and for the first time in a very long time, I did not feel like an outsider in the midst of my peers. I had found my place at Madison, and that meant something big. It was time to find more things that I loved about the school, and most important, it was time to retract all of my transfer applications.

The students on the Commons that day unknowingly told me that my struggles as a person of color mattered to them. Along with other like-minded college students, they helped created a movement that includes both the minority and the majority. They created the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement for our fallen soldiers, and in doing this, they taught me a lesson of love, and strength. They showed me what it meant to be the change, helped me discover my love for Madison and renewed my faith in the rest of society.