

Narrator: A warning to our listeners. This podcast contains messages that might trigger PTSD or anxiety in some people.

When Alexander Pittman left his house on Oct. 16, 2016, he wasn't expecting to be gone long. He had on slippers. Didn't take his wallet. Just grabbed his dog's leash and his cell phone.

Alexander Pittman: "I won't ever forget the day, I believe it was a Monday night, I took my dog out to go for a walk. And I was, I would say, maybe 100 yards, or maybe 200 yards from my, my driveway. So you know, still in my, on my street and my neighborhood."

Narrator: What happened next was one of those moments that, in a flash, reconfigures a life. It redefines expectations — for good or for bad. And though Pittman had experienced similar incidents, this moment indelibly imprinted upon him what it means to be Black in America.

Alexander Pittman: "I was unarmed, I was not aggressive. I was not doing anything illegal, or anything that looked illegal, I was doing something very wholesome walking my dog in my neighborhood, and you could still fall victim."

Narrator: This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer.

Alex Pittman today is a PhD student studying education at Ohio State. Four years ago, when an SUV pulled up next to him and two police officers got out, he was a high school social studies and history teacher in Hollywood Florida, attending to the mundane task of walking his dog, Marley.

Alexander Pittman: "I honestly thought that they were going to ask me some questions like, have you seen this person? I honestly didn't have an initial negative reaction to them. They

asked for my identification and asked what I was doing and where I was going. And so then it became very obvious that like, I was the target of their investigation.”

Narrator: If you’re Black, you probably know where the story is going. Because Pittman didn’t have his ID, so the officer told him to sit on the sidewalk.

Alexander Pittman: “I said, I’m gonna take my phone out. I’m going to record this. Because I feel like you are harassing me. And when I started to take my phone out and turn it on to record, the police officer became irate. I mean, you could see it in his face. And then he literally said, This is what the fucking problem is. All I asked you to do was sit down and you want to record it.”

Narrator: The officer tackled Pittman, who had a leash in one hand and the cell phone in the other, so there was no way to break his fall.

Alexander Pittman: “So it was literally him jumping on me and my face directly ~~to the~~ to the concrete. So I mean I had a black eye and a busted lip, glasses were broken because this was a hard impact. Keep in mind I didn't know that this would have escalated ... like in my mind everything is still okay from the standpoint of like there's not going to get physical. So this caught me completely off guard.”

Narrator: He spent the next two hours handcuffed in the back of the police cruiser, surrounded by seven other police cars. He had two thoughts going through his mind: Was his wife worried? And, if he got out of this, what would he tell his students tomorrow in class?

Music

Narrator: When we began interviewing Black students about their experiences with racism and how it has impacted their goals, we fully expected to hear about the microaggressions they

face. Like their being followed in the department store, or overlooked to lead a class project. Or having someone cross the street as they approach them on the sidewalk. These are all experiences that our students related to us.

We never expected to hear the same story over and over again. Male students and female students, their brothers and friends, wrongly accused by law enforcement, questioned and threatened for being in places where they fully belonged and treated in ways that white people aren't in the very same situations. And to be clear, these are all exemplary students, on scholarship, maintaining high GPAs, model citizens. If they were being wrongly accused, what was happening to other members of the Black community?

Take Dimetri Brandon, a Weiler Scholar, in his senior year at Ohio State:

Dimetri Brandon: "My dream is to become a professor in physical education. And I just want to be able to work with college-aged students."

Narrator: Brandon, who is Black, never had an instructor of color until he came to Ohio State. And then he met Samuel Hodge.

Dimetri Brandon: "I took adaptive PE with Dr Hodge. I just loved him as a professor. He didn't just only care about us as students but he cared about our home life and like what we did as well on the weekends. That was the first time I felt like I could relate to somebody that looks like me. That's my motivation, too, I want to be that positive role model for another African American male."

Narrator: He grew up in a predominantly white suburb that wasn't immune to racism. There's a private pond — for residents only — in the neighborhood where he and his family live. If Brandon goes to the pond with his white friends, everything is okay. Everybody fishes. But...

Dimetri Brandon: "If I go to the pond with four of my black friends, we will get the cops called on us."

Dimetri Brandon: "The cops always show up and they question us, and they ask me for my address"

Dimetri Brandon: "They ask us if we're like trespassing, do we belong to this neighborhood?"

Narrator: Brandon showed them his ID. Sometimes the officers apologized. But he calls these experiences emotionally exhausting.

Dimetri Brandon: "Just that whole process of the cops really having to be called because we're just want to go fishing at a pond. And we're just trying to be boys and have fun."

Dimetri Brandon: "And since it's happened three times now. And so I don't really go fishing anymore. and just like getting that taken away from me, is just something that's like, okay, I mean, I guess; but so it's hard to go through."

Narrator: His mother has asked him to stay away from the pond. She worries it's just not safe.

Music

Narrator: And there's Nimo Johnson, also a Weiler Scholar.

Nimo Johnson: "I'm currently a fourth year at Ohio State University studying STEM mathematics, with an overall goal to go back into the education system, and help students have someone of color to look up to, especially at that high school level where you see maybe one teacher of color, if you're lucky, or two really if you're super lucky."

Narrator: Johnson might have once considered himself somewhat inoculated against racism in his home suburb. But not long ago, he was driving home from his third-shift summer job at an Amazon warehouse.

Nimo Johnson: "I had just gotten off a shift and the speed limit goes 50, and then it goes 35 and then it goes 25, apparently. I did not realize it goes to 25.... And it was one cop that pulled me over, and next thing you know I had four cops. You don't know what's going to happen in that situation. The first thing that came to my mind is like why is there four cop cars here? I didn't even do anything but speed maybe five, miles over the limit. Maybe. What was even crazier about that specific moment is I didn't even know I was speeding. So I'm sitting there, like well, why do I have four cop cars? What's going on?"

Narrator: It was summer, so Johnson had his car windows open. One officer reached through the passenger window.

Nimo Johnson: "He had a flashlight and was trying to reach in like he was trying to look for something with this flashlight. Like they expected me to have some drugs or something like that... And so that was scary. With that I was like, okay I still have a family I have to get home to, my mother and my father."

Narrator: Johnson kept his cool. Didn't make any sudden moves. Kept his hands at 10 and 2 on the steering wheel. He drove away with a traffic warning, thinking about people in his shoes who never made it home. Over time, these experiences begin to erode trust and change behavior. Christian Hines, a PhD student studying literature for children and young adults, won't forget that her brother as a teenager was knocked to the ground leaving a store, even though he was clearly carrying his purchase in a shopping bag.

Christian Hines: "So I've always had this thing that even carried on as an adult that I noticed now is that if I'm shopping if I'm if I don't have a basket in my hand, and I'm holding something, I hold it all the way out in front of me, just so they don't assume I'm going to try to put it in my

bag or put it in my purse. But that comes from years of people following me around or looking at me suspiciously or standing at the counter tracking my every move every time I come into the store.”

Narrator: Her mother schooled Hines and her three brothers to avoid confrontation. Their job, her mother told them, was to act in a way as to not bring suspicion. Their job was to stay alive. That was never more true than when driving.

Christian Hines: “If there's a cop behind me, I inherently I'll slow down so they can pass by or I pull over. I don't like driving around police. I don't like driving past police.”

Christian Hines: “Those are a lot of things that I do because I know what can go wrong. And I consciously .... and it sucks because I literally still do that today. If I see a police officer, I'll literally pull over or get off at an exit if I'm on the interstate, wait until they pass and get back on the interstate and then just keep going.”

Music

Narrator: People of color develop conscious and unconscious strategies for dealing with racism, says Don Pope-Davis, dean of the College of Education and Human Ecology and a psychologist by training.

Don Pope Davis: “When you think through the long-term effects that these behaviors have on people, it increases fatigue, increases stress, you have the possibility of not wanting to trust anyone in authority ... If you are a person of color, you have developed some kind of mechanism to protect yourself, because if you don't, you can spiral into this mode of constant anxiety, depression, stress, and not to mention the cultural overtones of that, in our society,

given the health disparities, that we now know more emphatically impact the lives of people of color in different ways than other groups in our society.”

Narrator: Which explains why Summer Luckey, a PhD student in human development and family science, is a little fuzzy on the details of George Floyd’s death.

Summer Luckey: “I definitely did not see the video cuz, just where I am now, when stuff like that pops on top, I can't watch it. It's too much ... For my mental health and in order for me to have any hope in humanity any faith in white people or in the justice system, or whatever systems like we have, I just can't continue to expose myself to that.”

Narrator: And it explains why Nimo Johnson didn’t tell his friends about being pulled over by four police cars.

Nimo Johnson: “I don't talk about those stories with my friends at Ohio State because I think those stories within people of color we keep them to ourselves because we all know it happens ... If we say, Hey I got pulled over, we don't have to ask Did you have multiple cars come over, because they probably did happen. Or we know that they're experiencing microaggressions every day we don't have to mention it. We just know it's happening.”

Narrator: Why tell these stories? One reason is to develop understanding of the sizable obstacles that our Black students must scale to even become students at Ohio State. And also to underscore that, no matter how accomplished they might be, when they walk off campus, and sometimes even on campus, those impediments are thrown down at their feet again and again. It’s not for lack of trying by our Black students. Summer Luckey:

Summer Luckey: “I am ashamed to say I thought, you know, if I could be this image of like a quote unquote good Black person, like even white people will, I won't be the one they have to

worry about. But really, that doesn't matter. Like you could tap dance all you want, and at the end of the day, you're still going to be Black. I guess it's coming to terms with who you are and people just don't like you because of that. Because they just don't know.”

If we're making life this hard for these accomplished students, what about that young guy on the south side of Columbus or in East Cleveland? What chance does he have?

Music

Narrator: As instructors, administrators, teachers, coworkers and student allies, we can do better to support our Black students, Dean Pope-Davis says.

Don Pope Davis: “I suspect, given the full range of political realities in our societies, there will be some people who will be listening to this podcast and say, that can't possibly have happened. Because their worldview is very different than this experience. It is that notion of You don't believe it, until it happens to you. Or, you don't accept the truth of someone's story. And that, in itself causes another set of resentment and antagonism and anxiety.”

Don Pope Davis: “When I say to you, let me tell you my story. And your first response cannot be ‘Really? That really happened to you?’ You're essentially saying, ‘I don't believe you. That couldn't possibly happen. My experience with police officers, my experience with people in shops, my experience is different than yours.’ And that's the point.”

Narrator: That cycle of continued aggression, microaggression and then disbelief of would-be allies can have a very negative impact on any student's well-being and ability to learn.

Don Pope Davis: “You can develop, in my view, some aspects of PTSD. I want to keep my distance. I don't want to engage either in the classroom or what have you. And it takes a keen eye to notice those behavioral activities or responses to find out what's going on. How can you

be supportive? If you put this in an academic context, the faculty member, regardless of who they are, may need to ask a question, which is to be very explicit in saying, 'How can I help you?' Rather than saying, 'Let me get you some help.'"

Narrator: Because given their experiences, just opening up to a professor, teacher, fellow student, or even a counselor — who could likely be white — can be a big leap.

Don Pope Davis: "In telling that story. It requires an element of trust. And remember, in these fatiguing moments that you've articulated, trust is just about gone."

Narrator: Teachers and faculty to create a space for those conversations by integrating them into the curriculum.

Don Pope Davis: "You can make it a research project, you can make it a paper, you can make it a thought piece, you can read books and have discussions. So that's one way of doing that; developing pedagogical experiences, that require students in classrooms to be more self-reflective."

Narrator: And the instructor must participate in the process with the students.

Don Pope Davis: "If you do not have the capacity to self-reflect, you cannot engage in change ... But the instructor also has to lead by experience. It can't just be an activity for the students."

Narrator: And when you hear someone relate a story about how they've been the target racism, become invested in them.

Don Pope Davis: "These students don't need another person to say I'm sorry that happened to you. What they need to hear is I have an activist ally who really wants to engage in this. And recognize that the response will be different from different students. And a student may simply say, Thanks for asking that. Let me get back to you. I haven't thought that far through yet, as

I'm still processing this. And then you need to say, please get back to me because I want to do something.”

Narrator: You cannot underestimate how that continued support — true allyship — can impact a person of color. Christian Hines remembers attending a protest last summer.

Christian Hines: “There were more white people at the protest and standing next to these people chanting Black Lives Matter and it's not okay and they deserve to live. Or even going in neighborhoods in these predominantly white neighborhoods in the suburbs and seeing these Black Lives Matter flags and even talking to people in class or talking to people on the streets, or people in airports and Do you need anything or if they feel like something's happening, having them come stand beside, like, are you okay? Do you need assistance? And I think for me personally that summer, seeing white people kind of not just step up but step in line like, we see you. We understand. And this isn't just a black and brown problem. We're here. That made me feel better.”

Narrator: Some people fear that level of support won't continue. That piece is up to the rest of us. Our students are mostly hopeful and inspired, despite their negative and hurtful experiences, to respond in positive ways to a world that, at times, reviles them. Dimitri Brandon and Nimo Johnson want to be the teachers and instructors they needed in high school and now need in college. Summer Luckey wants to attack systemic racism in schools so that students of color can reach their potential.

Summer Luckey: “So when I think about our youth, and I think about the generations that are before me, they need to have a fair chance ... I want to be able to empower them to do that, to be able to be a change, you know, to decide if they do want to educate the majority on how to

interact with them, or if they really just want to forge their own path and aid their peers and their communities in elevating themselves, whatever their options are, I want them to have that because they deserve that.”

Narrator: Alexander Pittman, who appeared at the beginning of our episode, wasn't charged and at first told his high school students that he got his black eye after being elbowed playing basketball ... He feared the police officer who injured him might have been one of his student's relatives. He says his Christian faith carries him, that what is meant for evil will be used for good.

Alexander Pittman: “Because of the allyship that's been developed, because of just a combination of so many things, people who do care, people who do love instead of hate, ~~that~~ this is all gonna be used for the greater good, for something positive.”

Alexander Pittman: “I have to remain hopeful, because if I don't, you know, there's people, my nephews, my brothers, my sons, my students, and my God, who are watching me, and I have to remain hopeful, because that's the right thing to do. And I truly believe that.”

Narrator: He instructs undergraduate teaching and learning students, aiming to become a professor who can present a different perspective and inspire others. And, in the Office of Diversity Inclusion, Pittman mentors 30 Black, freshmen males, helping them surmount the obstacles to their higher education.

Hines says she is encouraged when her undergraduate students who are white say they want to be a part of the change.

Christian Hines: "To have these 20-year-old kids talk about diversity and equity and how black lives matter and they want to be there for their students and show up for their students, gives me joy because these are the people who will be in front of these Black and brown kids."

Christian Hines: "Looking at these other educators across the world who want the same things that I want, that fight for the same thing that I want. And they are taking this time to create these spaces, whether it's virtual spaces, whether it's them writing books, and talking about, like historically responsive literacy, or abolitionist teaching and knowing that, I'm not alone. "And I think that's a beautiful thing."

Narrator: As long as our students are regarded as anything other than the change makers and committed and brilliant global citizens that they are, we have work left to do. But at least, we have them, our students, leading the way.