

I rise

FOR OUR CHILDREN...



Lisa Gray, Associate Director for Diversity and Inclusion

Growing up, I really didn't think too much about kids. I didn't have any younger brothers or sisters that I played with or helped to take care of. I didn't do much babysitting. I wasn't even a camp counselor. I did tutor and mentor an elementary student through a high school club I was involved in, but it was only for one year. My tutoring and mentoring experience in high school led me to flirt briefly with the idea of becoming a lawyer and working alongside one of my heroes, Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund. However, I defined myself by other identities that mattered more to me at the time - being a Black African American girl, Christian, middle class, daughter, student and amateur dancer/actress.

Given all this, parenthood wasn't even on my radar. So, you can imagine my surprise in 1999 when I married my now former partner and started seriously thinking about becoming a mom. I wanted a boy first and then a girl. I figured if my daughter had a big brother, he would protect her and she would defend him - (Now, I see how patriarchal my thinking was back then, but I digress). I surprised myself even more in 2001 when I decided to become a mentor with Sister's Circle, Inc, a relationship-based mentoring program for middle and high school girls of color from inner-city Baltimore neighborhoods. Mentoring Imani, a 5th grade girl and later Shamera, a high school girl until they reached college was one of the scariest, joyful and most impactful experiences of my life. Looking back, I had no idea how to relate to them at first, but I will be forever grateful to Imani and Shamera who taught me how by just by being themselves.

Little did I know that my mentoring journey would help prepare me for the biggest challenge and greatest joy of my life - mothering my daughter. In 2003, I was blessed to give birth to one of the smartest, coolest, most beautiful old souls that I've ever met: Mia Rosa. Over the years, as she's grown from a baby to a teenager, and so have I - emotionally, mentally and spiritually. You see, becoming a mother forced me to get serious about why I am here on this planet and very clear about how and for whom I needed to pursue my life's work: to co-create a more loving, respectful, just and inclusive world for my daughter and all young people. It's to give back to them and pay forward all that I can. It's to push them when they need a boost and catch them when they've fallen. It's to be the wind beneath their wings so they can soar to higher heights.

Imani, Shamera, Mia and all the young people in my life kickstarted my journey from a diversity

educator and volunteer mentor to inclusion advocate and social justice change agent. I've made more than my share of missteps along the way and I still screw up more than I care to admit. But, I'm still striving to be the kind of woman, mother and global citizen that will help make this world better for them. Despite all the divisiveness and challenges facing our human family, every day I look in Mia's eyes and I become a little more hopeful; a little more brave; a little more steady and a little more ready to push back against oppression and inequality in all its forms. So, I rise for Mia, and in doing so, I rise for all our children.

