

2020 Inspiration Award winner: Lisa McRipley



Lisa McRipley learned an early lesson in empowerment.

by James Townsend

Early on in her life, Lisa McRipley learned the value of speaking up when she felt something was wrong.

When she was an eighth-grade Black student in a predominantly white school, a substitute teacher announced that the class would be watching the movie “Gone with the Wind” in segments over three days. After a scene in which the late Butterfly McQueen portrayed Scarlett O’Hara’s slave girl, Prissy, the teacher said, “It was so wonderful back then. I wish it were like that now.” McRipley had had enough: “I want you to take that back,” she told the teacher. “If it were still like that today, I would be a slave.”

The teacher scolded her, saying, “You are out of order!” But McRipley replied, “I refuse to watch this film,” and walked out of the classroom with her friend, the only other Black girl in the class.

“I called my mom and told her what happened. She drove to the school, met with the principal and stood up for me. She always told me never to let anyone tell us we were less than. Both my parents really helped me to feel empowered.”

McRipley, who went on to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees, has worked in higher education in colleges and universities in Michigan and California. She’s a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the first historically African American Greek-lettered sorority,

whose members include Vice President Kamala Harris.

After being diagnosed with MS in 2010 and no longer able to work, McRipley moved back to Michigan, where she became an MS Activist with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. She has been a volunteer organizer for all five Conferences for African American/Black Families Affected by MS in Detroit. She also helped organize the Society's Black MS Experience Summit in 2020. McRipley is a Society trustee in Michigan.

As an MS Activist, she has shared her story about dealing with unaffordable MS medications. She reached out to U.S. Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, who presented McRipley's story during the House of Representatives Oversight and Reform Committee's hearing on drug pricing. Tlaib is a member of the Congressional MS Caucus, which focuses on issues that affect people living with MS.

"Rep. Tlaib is deeply committed to serving her constituents and passionate about serving her community," McRipley says. "She helped me understand the importance of advocacy."

"When I connected with the people in the MS Society," McRipley says, "I knew I had found my tribe."

James Townsend is a writer in Boulder, Colorado.

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