

**CASE STUDY****Rich Miller**

**“Self-respect is one gift that you give yourself.”**

Speaking slowly and deliberately, Rich Miller<sup>1</sup> is a young man who thinks carefully about life, education, and the key role of family. Rich is 17 years old and is just graduating from high school. He is Black and has lived in a racially and ethnically mixed community in Boston since he was born. Rich says that the neighborhood “isn’t bad” but laments that it was once much nicer than it is now.

The youngest of three children, Rich lives with his mother, brother, and sister. Both of his siblings are in college—his brother in a public college in the South studying engineering, and his sister in a private liberal arts college in New England. All three are close in age, the oldest being 20. Rich’s mother is a nursery and kindergarten teacher. She did not attend college until she was an adult, and she has had to struggle to get an education and develop her professional career. Consequently, she feels very strongly about the need for her children to get a college education. This is a major value in their family. Rich is clearly devoted to his mother and considers himself lucky to be part of his family, but he is also quick to point out that at times he feels that his mother is overbearing, “getting on his case.”

Rich feels that he has had a good basic education. He has always gone to desegregated schools that have “a good mix” and are, he recalls, free of racial tension. At present, he attends a comprehensive high school that he describes as “pretty good.” He decided not to go to his neighborhood school because his high school offers a number of special programs, including one in music. Almost three-quarters of the students in his school are African American, about 10 percent Latino, 15 percent White, and a small number of Asians. Rich will be graduating this year, and, although he feels that he has had a very good education there, he points out that the teachers’ expectations are often based on their students’ race and background. He plans to study pharmacology and has been accepted into a respected program at a good college.

Because he has been studying music (both violin and piano) since fourth grade, Rich has been very involved in the music program at school. He played at graduation and other occasions, and he has conducted workshops for other students. Music is a big part of Rich’s life outside of school, too. He plays the organ at his church, and he and his family frequently take part in church activities. Thus his church is also a significant part of his life. Rich is contemplating combining a profession as a pharmacist with teaching music to private students.

Three themes emerged through interviews with Rich. One is his great sense of personal responsibility and independence; another focuses on the expectations and pressures he feels from society and teachers and some of the attitudes he has developed as a result. The third relates to family lessons that he has learned along the way.

### Personal Responsibility

I'm more or less an independent person. I don't depend on anyone to do anything for me. . . . I don't let dependence stand in the way of anything that has to get done. . . . I don't depend on anyone learning for me or making decisions for me or anything. I just want to see how far I can carry myself and what I can achieve on my own. I'm saying that I wouldn't accept the aid of others, but just see what Rich can do.

The first year [of high school] was real heavy . . . because I was in that transition going from junior high to high school, and at that particular time, when you have that homework—I had never had this much homework before! . . . My mother stayed on me about that, but then it was my decision. That first semester of my first year was, oh, it was terrible. It actually opened my eyes up that it was left up to me; it's up to me to go and get that education.

I'm looking at the future as long as I can just continue right into education and not wait until the latter part of my life. I believe that "business before pleasure," so take care of this now and later I can enjoy the time off; I can enjoy the finer things in life that one wants earlier. . . . Many of us want to go out and get cars, but some things have to give and some things come first. I feel that, if I involve myself in a lot of things now within the world, then that may hinder me from getting my education. . . . My future is getting that education. Whatever else happens after that, I won't have that problem or worry about getting a job.

I decided on pharmacy. . . . That's next to being a doctor, so it's just as hard. I decided that I wanted to go into a career that would give me guaranteed bacon. . . . Like with music, there's so much competition out here and no matter how much or how hard you study, there's always somebody better than you are. . . . So I figured there's enough room out here for pharmacists.

I always liked music, but when I was little I never felt there was a place for me in music. Other people are talented, and they can just sit down and just actually play. Well, I started from scratch, so I didn't know that there was a place for me. . . . So I began taking lessons . . . and I have stuck with that.

There was a time that I had decided to go into music education. Now, I am going to pursue this career in pharmacy, but I also want to be a music teacher. . . . Now, as far as performance, that's something that has to be worked with. I feel there can be a slot for me in music education.

I plan on keeping my music up. I really don't have hobbies and I don't play too many sports or anything like this, so I really think this keeps me going. It gives me something to go for from day to day, and you learn something new all the time.

I'm always looking to learn something new. The music I like playing the most is, well, I like playing between the classical and the gospel music. I learned the classical, and I always feel that it's a challenge. That's the first music that I really got into before I began the gospel music. . . . I like gospel music because I like to play for the church.

Getting ahead in life, not letting anyone discourage you in any way [is important]. Say, "Well, I want to go forth and do this. . . ." And then someone might say, "Well, I don't think you can do it; I don't think you can make it." And because of someone saying something, then you decide, "Well, no, I'll leave it alone. . . ." I think no matter what anyone says, if you feel that within yourself you can achieve something, go for it!

I was fairly comfortable in school. I'll admit, I mainly kept to myself. Now, it's not saying that I didn't have any friends or anything like that. I had friends, but I knew how to take relationships up to how far. So I've maintained trust and loyalty to friends. So it's not like I was totally alone. . . . I know how I want my friends to treat me, and I treat them how they would expect to be treated.

Friends won't let you down. Friends will be around. My closest friends are there . . . moreso to offer encouragement to get that education. . . . Many of my friends are encouraging me to go on to college. I've had that kind of push from outside just as much as I have from inside.

There's just things that I just want to fulfill for myself, and, if it takes the rest of my life, eliminating [plans for a] family and whatever, then so be it. . . . I don't want to take on a million responsibilities at once.

### Expectations, Pride, and Shame

I went to the Robert Jennings School, where we had an Advanced Work Class. Advanced Work Class was more like an exam school for elementary students [Note: Students need to take an examination to be admitted]. . . . That's when I first became familiar with music. We had a teacher to come in to teach violin and cello and those string instruments. So that's where I first started with music and I began taking violin. My mother asked me did I want to take piano lessons, so that's also when I started taking piano lessons.

I was a good student in the average class, the normal, basic class that everyone has to go through. Now, getting into the Advanced Work Class, there are students who fall behind. And I think that I wasn't really looking to be there. I managed to get myself there, but I don't think I really wanted to be there. And I think that's more what the problem was.

I did act out, as I didn't want to be there. But between my mother and the faculty, I never did get out! So, I managed to be in there up until the end of eighth grade. I was trying to get out by acting out, but they didn't go for that because it was just a show that I was putting on that could be stopped. It wasn't a real disability of not being able to do the work.

There are certain teachers that challenge you to think. There are students who say, "School is really tough and I can't do this and I can't do that, and this is just too hard for me. . . ." Some students get through high school; that's it for education for them. They don't pursue college. They take a trade because they might be better at working with their hands. . . . Then there is a part that helps you to think. Some people like challenging problems. . . . I believe there are parts of school that can promote you to think.

[Chemistry class] was just totally interesting. When I first heard of it, you know, my brother and sister, they had chemistry before I did. . . . To hear them tell it, chemistry was hard and I just knew I couldn't do it. . . . But I did it. . . . I still didn't understand it like I understand music. You can tell me something about music, and I can understand it; I can see how you go about it. There were some things in chemistry that I couldn't. I myself personally feel like I need to take it all over again. . . . That's what made up in my mind that anything that you want to do, it can be done. Because I just had in my mind that I couldn't do it. . . . I kept at it, I didn't give up. . . . The teacher just constantly told us that



it's not difficult. The only difficult thing is getting that understanding. Once you understand how you do something, you can in fact go on with it.

There were games that go on. Like math classes, when we had math competitions that actually help you to learn. You'd win little prizes, candy prizes, or whatever. It actually made school a bit more interesting. It made learning a lot easier because it was a game.

I would put more activities into the day that can make it interesting. . . . It's up to you what you think you might be interested in. If you think that you're interested in dance, which they had, that would be fun to you, so then you would not look at it as being a math class. Who likes a math class? There are people who do, but who really likes a math class that would go there because they like being there? But for people who like to dance or the physical education class, they would break their neck practically to get into that class.

I believe a teacher, by the way he introduces different things to you, can make a class interesting. Not like a normal teacher that gets up, gives you a lecture, or there's teachers that just pass out the work, you do the work, pass it in, get a grade, good-bye!

I didn't know what I wanted to do; I had no *idea*. At least the majority of students graduating have some idea of what they want to do. I didn't have the faintest. So [my guidance counselor] put in front of me many different brochures about dental hygienist or pharmacy and other different careers. . . . Well, I didn't hear of too many people in the career of pharmacy, so it's something that I want to try. I feel that if I put forth that effort, there's a chance for me. . . . She was more like you would say a fellow classmate. There's always somebody who knows just a little bit more that can help you out. It wasn't about "Well, make an appointment to come and see me." She was always glad to help, so when she offered or presented you with different things or different ideas, or careers, it was from the heart more so than from "doing my job." It made a difference, because she has a general idea of what you're about and what you might like.

This particular guidance counselor . . . I had her for my sophomore year in high school. And till the end of June, even after graduation, I was still seeing her. . . . We still keep in touch. She's White. . . . She'd probably have in the range of 200 [students]. . . . She gave me ideas. . . . If I didn't have the guidance counselor that I had, then I really don't know what direction I would be in.

I don't think that we [Black folks] do enough to stick out like a sore thumb. I don't think we do enough to put us on top or put us up in a higher league. I don't think many of us are working to the ability that we can. We are settling for the easiest way out as far as working, as far as education. We feel that after high school, that's it for us; we don't have to go on with it. As far as getting a job, some of us even would resort to selling drugs (not only the Black race, but specifically speaking on the Black race); we would even go to sell drugs just to make it easier for us. I mean, selling drugs, you can make more that day than the average person makes a week. We always oftentimes, we set up the limits rather than going on to higher expectations.

It's important to me because I believe that I am no different from anyone else. I believe there is a space for me. And it's up to me as an individual; it's up to others in the Black race, to take on those opportunities to further ourselves education-wise and as far as living is concerned.

I'm not saying that there's not enough of us out there. I mean, let's take a household, for example. Nine times out of ten, out of a family, there may be at least one person that succeeds in life. Well, why can't everyone succeed in life? That's the question that I'm asking: Why can't everyone?

We're somewhat tacky. We don't act professional at anything. I'm not saying everyone, but there are some of us who just don't want to be professional. We rely on welfare to take care of us. I don't believe that even those that are on welfare, I don't believe that anyone should have to touch welfare. . . . You know, there are some of us who are smart or some of us who are able to either further our education or get a job, and we don't even want to do that much. . . . Lazy. I think lazy, and we get too comfortable. . . . "Well, I won't go today, I'll go tomorrow." And tomorrow never comes. And I think too many of us are just too comfortable at home, comfortable with the way things are, not really struggling, getting this check every month.

See, I believe that you can take a rich White and put him in a poor Black neighborhood, and he would [be] somewhat immune to it. But if you take a Black and put him in a rich White neighborhood, how do you think that Black would act? There are some of us who are classy, but then there are some who like to have those parties, and have everyone over and being loud. They just really can't fit in.

I feel that's something that Black people are doing to themselves. Like, for instance, I find that a White can move anywhere, and a Black, if he wants to get out in a highly suburban area where there are rich White doctors, something like that, and for instance, if that house is \$300,000, it might go up \$100,000 just so you can't get in there. Because it is known for Blacks to, not necessarily true, but it is known for Blacks to pull down an area.

I believe that we can do something about it as Blacks. Because we buy homes, very nice homes and so forth, but we don't seem to be upkeeping our homes. We just let it fall down to the ground completely. And then we say, "Oh, look at them! They're not taking care of the house," and whatever.

With [my] school being predominately Black, well, it's natural that you're going to have quite a bit of top Black students. However, if you were to take those top Black students, say you have two top Black students, and you put them in a classroom with 20 top White students, where would you rank? . . . Just how educated do you think you are? You know some of us, because we sit in this class, and we say, "Well, I'm the smartest," just how educated are you?

Most people think it's not being top [because it's a Black school]. . . . I think if we had more White students, Black students would go further. I find that White students want to learn. Most White students wanted to learn as much as they can get. I think standards would be higher [if there were more White students].

Many of the White teachers there don't push. . . . Their expectations don't seem to be as high as they should be. I mean, work that I feel myself, being a teacher, I would give them to promote any kind of high standards. I know that some Black teachers, their expectations are higher than White teachers. . . . They just do it, because they know how it was for them. . . . Actually, I'd say, you have to be in Black shoes to know how it is.

Black teachers . . . want to impress you more about getting an education, you know; they're your own race, more so than the opposite race. Because of back then, segregated times or times when you weren't able to get that education. But I think that it is



just important to all teachers and to all students just to teach the curriculum as they would in an all-White school or as they would any other student.

My only thing to make it better is just to encourage the teachers to push the curriculum, that's about it.

### Family Lessons

I have one brother, one sister, and my mother. And we're just a happy-go-lucky family. My brother is the oldest; my sister is the second to the last in line. It's okay, because the parent and first-child relationship has broken the barrier for the second and the last child. So things that they did, they can expect from the second and the third. So it's not like it's tougher on me.

[My mother] didn't go to college right away . . . so she felt that a lot of what she's doing now, she could've been doing back then. But by not going to school right away, by prolonging that time, "Well, I won't go this year, but I'll go next year," has turned into a matter of years. And she feels that if you go right after school, then things will look up. And then you'll say, "Well, I'm glad I went to school now rather than wait." You see, we don't want to go to school (going to college, I should say) because we've had it with 12 years of school! It's hard; it's dull; it's boring; we don't like the teachers! So this is our option, whether we want to go on to college. And many of us feel that "Well, I'm not going to go right away. . . ." And she didn't want the same thing to happen to us. . . . Even today, she's wondering, "Well, what are you going to do about school? All I want is you kids to go to college and get an education and live a halfway decent life."

It mattered to me, because I used to say to myself, and probably still do, back in my mind, "Well, what's the big deal about going to school?" I'm not going to find a job without going to college.

I like the goals and objectives that she set for herself being a single parent. Things that I would change: She's really bossy. I should say bossy to her children, not to everyone else. Because she desires those things for us to go on and gradually be pharmacists and nurses and engineers. So, she's very persistent. . . . It's out of love, but it's really aggravating [*laughs*]. . . . Actually, it is out of love and persistence, so I'm trying to bear with it.

It's wonderful being a member of my family. We have our ups and downs, but every day, I have fun. I enjoy being with my mother, my sister, and my brother. And I don't think I can compare her. I wouldn't exchange her for anyone else's parents. . . . I mean, look at us, we're not out roaming the streets or anything like that.

My sister's going into nursing, so it's the same [field], medicine. So I'm looking to actually learn with her. Because some classes, she already had that I'm going to be taking in the fall. And then some classes we're going to be having together. So I feel that this will be an excellent benefit for the both of us.

I don't want to be a letdown to my family, personally, and to myself. But I feel that if I tried and then failed, then that's a different story. At least I did put forth that effort. But you never know until you've tried. You don't know what you can do or what you cannot do unless you've tried.

I've learned from my family, I could say how to survive. Now you say, how do you survive? I know I've learned how to work a job, how to stay on the job.

I've learned about being Black . . . that Blacks have to work harder at things. Some things are just harder than others. What I mean by working hard, I say if you work hard now, it'll pay off later. It definitely will. Something good will come in your life. But let's not look at life as a piece of cake, because eventually it'll dry up, it'll deteriorate, it'll fall, it'll crumble, or somebody will come gnawing at it. . . . But we want to build solid foundations for ourselves and for our future generations, for our future children.

We find many students saying, "Well, Mom, you didn't go to college. How come you're making me go?" But let's not look at it that way. Let's look at it, "Well, you have the opportunity; you can get scholarships; you can get financial aid." And just pursue it. Do something for yourself. You know, it might be hard trying to help with your parents, but that'll make them happy, by you prospering.

Grades are very important to my family. My mother is the most influential on that, and my sister. . . . At all times, I just look out for what Rich can do, what he can accomplish, how well he can do it. Because I find that when you are competing, sometimes if you're trying just a little too hard, sometimes we try just a little too hard and we end up messing things up for ourselves. So I feel that, don't take it easy, but you know how much you can take and when to let go. I'm comfortable setting my own standards.

I mean, I feel that there's a thing with "very well," "good," "average," and "poor" and "inferior." I believe that everyone should at least be "average." It's all right to come out "good" and it's all right to come out "excellent," but you should try to at least be average.

I'm just looking forward to all of us to be graduates of some college. Even if not my brother and sister, I at least want to do something for myself. As they say, self-respect is one gift that you give yourself. And I feel that I'll be doing something for myself if I go to college. Nobody can't go to college for you; nobody can't get that knowledge and understanding for you but yourself. So I think I'm going to be doing something for myself.


My mother won't always be there. So that's where it's left for you to decide: "Well, what am I going to do? How am I going to avoid this situation?"

I think the only thing that's holding me back from getting a good education might be me. I just have to be ready to accept it. I want to pursue a future the right way . . . and not find myself in a graveyard or in jail somewhere.

### COMMENTARY

The three themes revealed here are inextricably linked. Independence and responsibility, for example, are major values in Rich Miller's life. He has learned these by being the son of a strong woman who is deeply concerned about the education of her children, but the expectations held for him by teachers and society sometimes counteract this message. What emerges in this case study is a portrait of a highly complex young man who is independent, resourceful, mature; at once proud, and critical of his culture; and always appreciative of his family for their pressure and support. Through the messages of family, school, and community, Rich has also learned that Blacks have to work harder to get anywhere and that White teachers have lower expectations of Black students than of White.

The sociopolitical context in which Rich has developed his values and learned these lessons cannot be underestimated. For example, Rich's enrollment in an Advanced Work Class placed him with a minority of African American students. Data



collected by the U.S. Office for Civil Rights support the contention that African American students do not receive equal educational opportunities but in fact are subjected to what has been called “second generation school discrimination” through practices such as ability grouping, differential disciplinary practices, and lower graduation rates. They are grossly overrepresented in classes for the mentally retarded and grossly underrepresented in classes for the gifted and talented.<sup>2</sup> Although racism may be manifested differently from before, it still exists.

Another way messages are communicated to students is through the social status of students and staff in schools. Rich, for example, has concluded that the presence of more White students would raise standards for all students. It is not the presence of these students that would raise standards, however, but rather teachers’ expectations of them. The issue he raises is one of teachers’ perceptions as well as of student responsibilities. Even the percentage of Black teachers in a school may make a crucial difference (in his case, for instance, Rich feels that Black teachers have higher standards for Black students). He is actually right in this. In a review of research studies about this issue, Joseph D’Amico found that schools with ethnically and racially diverse student populations, especially in cases where the White students outnumber students of color, have a narrower achievement gap between White students and students of color.<sup>3</sup> In this case, it may be that teachers’ higher expectation of White students create higher expectations of students of color also.

In Rich’s case, we can see that the relationship among students, teachers, and communities can influence both student achievement and the perceptions they may have of themselves and their people. Organizational arrangements in schools such as tracking, discriminatory disciplinary policies, and testing can also have an impact. All of these factors in combination may send damaging messages to young people about themselves, their families, and their cultural groups.

Rich has benefited academically from school, but in the process he has picked up some disabling messages: that Blacks are lazy, unproductive, and too ready to take “the easy way out.” Rich has no doubt seen individuals in his own community who reinforce these perceptions, but, by presenting the problem in such broad strokes, it becomes an indictment not against *particular* Blacks but against Blacks as an entire group. Rich has learned to “blame the victim,” although he himself becomes one of them.

The issue is not this simple, however. Although Rich may be demonstrating some negative perceptions of his community, he is also tremendously proud of his culture: He loves gospel music and is involved in his church; he wants to “build solid foundations” for future generations; and, most important, he feels that Blacks can take control of their lives. (“I believe we can do something about it as Blacks.”) His ideas are influenced by expectations from schools and society and point to their complex role in helping young people develop their self-concepts.

Black self-esteem has been studied by many scholars. The pioneering research by William Cross on African American identity can help explain the many and seemingly contradictory statements made by Rich about his culture, family, and teachers. Cross points out that diversity is at the very core of Black psychology. Although most African Americans have healthy personalities, they may have different ideologies. Cross also challenges the view that “Negro self-hatred” is a thoroughly documented finding or that it explains everything. He proposes that it is a complex,

layered, multidimensional construct. In what he calls “The Pre-Encounter Stage” of Black identity, Cross describes several characteristics and attitudes that are clearly evident in Rich: social stigma attitudes (race is seen as a problem or stigma); anti-Black attitudes (a “blame the victim” prism); and spotlight, or race image, anxiety (anxiety about being “too Black,” and hence too conspicuous).<sup>4</sup> This anxiety is evident when Rich talks about Blacks being loud or not taking care of their property. Cross points out what is apparent in Rich: “A great deal of pain and sorrow can be associated with such behaviors.”<sup>5</sup>


The role of parents and family in building strong character and motivating children to succeed in school is equally important. Rich’s mother and siblings have provided strong motivation for him to succeed and go on to higher education, but Rich’s mother is not unlike other parents in this regard. What makes her different is that she knows how to help her children get the education they need. Because she herself went to college, albeit several years after graduating from high school, she is convinced that a college education is necessary to her children’s welfare. Her involvement with her children’s education, starting with elementary school, is evident every step of the way. Rich talks of how instrumental she was in keeping him in the advanced class. He also complains, although lovingly, that she is too “bossy.” She came from an economically oppressed family, and she learned the hard lesson of the value of an education and passed it on to her children. The fact that she may have been poor or that she is a single parent has not been viewed by her as insurmountable roadblocks.

These family lessons are not always easy to teach. In fact, some of them run counter to the reality that Rich confronts every day and that he will continue to face in the future. The role that a strong family takes on in teaching its children to struggle against societal constraints becomes much more crucial in the lives of Rich and other students of color who must constantly buck the tide of low expectations and negative images.

Rich Miller is, like all of us, a product both of his environment and of his own doing. He has learned about his worth and about the value of an education from his mother. He has learned about his culture from his family, his church, and the community in which he lives and goes to school. He has learned about the expectations of Blacks from his teachers and from society in general, and he has learned the important lesson that “self-respect is one gift that you give yourself.” We are left with the portrait of a young man who defies easy categorization and who challenges us as educators to look beyond stereotypes of students, their families, and communities for the more subtle but complex issues that help explain student achievement.

### TO THINK ABOUT

1. What does Rich Miller mean when he says, “Self-respect is one gift that you give yourself”?
2. What do you think has helped Rich become a successful student?
3. How is Rich’s determination to get ahead apparent to you? How might it be related to his criticisms of other Blacks?

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4. Rich says that most teachers “just pass out the work, you do the work, pass it in, get a grade, good-bye.” What are the implications for teachers? How might you design a curriculum to appeal to Rich?
  5. Think of some of the Black students you teach or have known. How are they different from Rich? How are they the same? What did you learn from reading this case study?

### CASE STUDY

## Vanessa Mattison

**“A good education is like growing, expanding your mind and your views.”**

Vanessa Mattison<sup>1</sup> is 17 years old and European American, and her family has been in the United States for generations. Vanessa lives in a small, rural hill town in western New England, but she has had a number of experiences that have helped make her far more worldly than others in her circumstances. By 17, she had traveled to Africa, the Caribbean, and Mexico. Her travels opened her eyes to some of the realities beyond Welborn Hills, the town where she lives.

Welborn Hills is a small community made up of several diverse groups of people: farming families, who have lived in the area for generations; newer families with more formal education and more liberal values who have left urban areas in search of a more rural and simple lifestyle; and working-class families, who make their living in the retail and light industry of the surrounding towns and small cities. Although Vanessa’s family does not fit neatly into any category, it is probably closest to the second group. For example, they read not only *Newsweek* but also *Greenpeace*; they are vegetarians; they listen to Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and reggae and blues music; and they have traveled from time to time. A number of the other families from Welborn Hills routinely travel outside the United States, but others have never even been to Boston or New York, both just a few hours away by car. In the town’s only elementary school, as well as in the regional secondary school that the town’s students attend, the class conflict between the more liberal and educated families and the families that have lived here for generations is almost palpable.

Only a tiny minority of the residents of Welborn Hills are people of color. The same is true of Hills Regional High School, a grades 7 to 12 school with a population of approximately 700 students, which serves a number of rural towns including Welborn Hills. For many of the European American students, access to understanding cultural differences and to meeting and being friends with people different from themselves depends on class and educational privilege. Only students who have had the privilege of traveling—as Vanessa has—have any inkling of the influence of racism or cultural differences on those different from themselves. Both