"Words without Meaning"
Nile Ward | Silver

As a young kid, I grew up around two parents who I always saw taking things apart. If my mom had to change a tire on her car, I was her shadow, grabbing whatever tools she needed. If my dad had to fix a leaking pipe in the kitchen, I crawled into the cabinet with a wrench in hand to help tighten the washers. I liked to take things apart and find out how they worked once my dad taught gave me one of them little plastic toolkits in first grade. And then it went to making things out of wood and with steel tools in third grade. I enjoyed doing these things! But mostly at home… (sigh) During most of my time in middle school, and some of my time in high school, I was one of only three to five black students in the class. At school, during recess, I would play out in the sandbox, finding sticks and wood chips, jump ropes, whiffle balls – whatever I could find, to make some sort of structure that, now, I have no idea what they were! I would work for fifteen minutes on those little structures in the sand, and for the other fifteen minutes… I (hesitate) attempted to show them to the teacher who moderated recess. Mrs. Gibbs was her name, and she would always give me a pat on the back and a smile, and then take a picture, too, for the school website… *when* the creations weren't kicked over by my classmates. A few times, I've had some classmates walk up to me and try to look tough to intimidate me. The one I remember most was when I was confronted by three of the so-called "Cool Kid Crew" kids – which actually was a thing that existed in my early days of middle school. They'd ask "You think you a better builder than us?" And every time, I'd pick up a little shovel in my left hand, point it at them, and say "*Yeah*, as a matter of fact. I *am* a better builder than you. I like building things!" And they would always give me that look of jealousy and… well… hatred, too.

Who would have known that playing with plastic tools, building sand and jump rope buildings would have led me to the next major step of my passion for engineering: starting my carpentry business in high school. It was a great business for a while… I was making custom furniture for residential use, hospitals – all types of stuff – and I had saved up the profits that I had earned

from this to go to college. However, before that was able to happen, I also had to deal with the portion of "being myself" which involved other people telling me what I should and should not do – or rather, what I should not do. "Oh, you should be playing basketball," or "You should go be a cashier at a fast-food joint," are just two examples of things I heard. Now that I was at this point in my life, I was able to take a little time to think: were they right? *Should* I be playing basketball? Should I go work at a fast food restaurant selling cheap and greasy food? What if I can't do engineering?

I actually tried playing basketball once while in high school. I chucked the ball at the… hoop thingy… and I was off by about three feet. "Well, that worked," I had said under my breath, and then I went back into the lab, grabbed a drill, a few screws and pieces of wood, and just started building whatever appeared on the table at the end.

At a point in my life, maybe during sophomore or junior year in high school, I started to get used to the negative outside pressure from my peers and dismiss it as just words with no meaning.