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True Connections...

by Jamar Jones

I've had the pleasure of meeting most of the faculty and staff at the School of Government. If I haven't met you, you've probably seen me in the hallways. I work in the IT department. I am a black man and I'm 6'9". I'm hard to miss.

Being this tall has some advantages. I earned a basketball scholarship for college. I never need a stepping stool to change a light bulb. I can easily find my children in stores.

Being a 6'9" black man also comes with challenges. I am sometimes perceived as threatening when I'm doing nothing at all. Case in point, I took my wife to dinner at a very nice restaurant in Virginia Beach. We were reviewing the menu when the waiter

came to the table to take our order. The waiter was about to tell us about the specials when he paused to say "Wow, you're intimidating." I gave him a polite smile and waited for him to continue.

Things like this are a common occurrence in my life. People see me and immediately judge me because of my height and skin color.

I get it. Our subconscious minds are constantly trying to determine if we are in danger. We have a part of our brain hardwired to protect us from perceived threats. There is scientific evidence that our subconscious minds immediately determine that people who are not like us are a potential threat.

The problem comes in when we stop there. When we don't question our initial responses. When we are not mindful of how we are perceiving someone who is different from us. Imagine how different our interactions would be if we just took a minute to pause and recognize that we may be prejudging someone we have never met.

Because of how I am often perceived, I try to put my preconceived notions aside and get to know a person for who they are. This approach has expanded my life and world view. I hope that we can all work on forming true connections with people and not just our perceptions of them.