Address to Teachers:
An African American Parent’s Perspective
by Kimberly Rockwell

Kimberly Rockwell’s daughter, Brannon, attends the Mill’s
College Children’s Preschool, a laboratory school designed to
give student teachers the opportunity to interact with children
in an idealized teaching environment. As part of their training,
the teachers attend a weekly seminar on educational-skills
building. Kimberly Rockwell was asked to speak to the group
of teachers, 90% of whom were Caucasian, as part of their
curriculum requirement for anti-biased teaching. Each student
was asked to read Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege:
Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (see page 23). The following
address was delivered to the class of education students
who were teaching Brannon and her peers at Mills College in
February, 1996.

While considering what I would speak about today — what I
would share — it was interesting to me to realize that I was
very conscious of reviewing and analyzing the ways some
of my experiences or opinions might affect my audience.
Would it make you uncomfortable? Would you perceive me
as a whiner, unjustifiably leaning on a crutch of racism? But
it then occurred to me that I was subjecting myself to what
I call my “Acceptability Scanner,” designed to make myself
more acceptable and less threatening as a person of color in
a White context. That scanner is familiar; I walked through it
every morning on the way to my job as an investment analyst
for a large real estate corporation, where I was the only African
American and one of three people of color in a firm of over 150
employees.

Considering what I would speak about today, I was overcome
by a tsunami of recollections, and had to remind myself
repeatedly that I only had five or so minutes to speak. Exactly
what did I want to share? Could I comfortably, unemotionally,
relate how my counselor at the private high school I attended
had lied to me for two years, telling me that I need only pass
Math 1 to gain entrance into UCLA or USC, only to discover
at the end of my sophomore year, after sending away for
materials myself, that most colleges wouldn’t even look
at my application without algebra, geometry, trigonometry
and calculus? When I asked the counselor, a nun, why she
hadn’t told me the truth, she said she didn’t believe I could
get in anyway and she didn’t want to get my hopes up. I was
a B student, yet she had told me this lie all the time from
our first meeting in my freshman year until our last meeting
at the end of my sophomore year. I later discovered that I
wasn’t alone; other Black students had had similar or virtually
identical experiences with this counselor. Although some
Blacks counseled by this woman were put on the college
track, they were the daughters of doctors, lawyers, and other
professionals, with parents knowledgeable about college
requirements and the demands of a college prep program. My
parents, on the other hand, relied on the fact that they were
paying tuition to a private college prep high school whose
instructors and administrators would guide their daughters’
futures. Could I share this part of my life with you, I asked
myself, without tearing up at the memory still so vivid and
painful?

I decided to read the article “White Privilege: Unpacking the
Invisible Knapsack,” to see if a format suggested itself. One
did. I read the list of 26 conditions of privilege and decided
to create my own list. I hope it provides you with another
perspective and perhaps an opportunity to increase your
sensitivity to the complex issues of guiding and helping to
mold the lives of young people.

I’ve titled my list, “Pet Peeves; or Experiences I’ve Had Which
I’m Saddened to Consider My Four-Year-Old Daughter Will
Also Likely Experience as a Person of Color in This Society.”
All of these incidents have occurred to me in either academic
or work environments. It angers me:

1. that books and magazines by and about people of color
are treated as specialty items. For example, I can’t buy
a national magazine like Essence in my neighborhood in
Berkeley at either the local bookstore or at the pharmacy
newsstand;

2. to be told that I speak “so well” when White colleagues
are not so complimented even though our verbal
presentation is the same;

3. to be “complimented” by being told that I don’t sound
Black. Do all African Americans speak the same? Do all
Whites? Of course not;

4. to be told by a college professor at our first in-person
encounter, a professor who had previously read and
graded my papers and spoken to me on the telephone,
that I didn’t “present as Black”;

5. to be asked, “How do you comb your hair?” or be told
“Wow, it’s so soft!” when someone assumes that it’s
perfectly okay to touch my hair without asking. On one
occasion, a White colleague walked into my office and, while waiting for a report, reached out, touched my hair and asked, “Is this a weave?” She said she’d never seen a Black woman with naturally long hair. I was dumbfounded.

6. to be asked by Caucasians what I’m “mixed with.” When I was a young girl I was a little surprised by the question, because I saw myself as very clearly African American, but proudly answered that I also have Native American blood. The resulting reactions ranged from “Oh, then you’re not really Black,” to “That explains it.”

7. to be asked if my daughter, whose skin is lighter than my own, is mine; whether I am her real mother. The first time I was asked this question was while limping from a Cesarean birth, with an abdomen still much swollen from pregnancy.

My hopes and goals for my daughter’s education are she see people of color that — consistently, not intermittently — as role models, as teachers and administrators. I want her not to be the only person of color, or one of only a few, in her classrooms. I don’t want my daughter told, as I was on more than one occasion, that “I don’t see you as a person of color; I just see you as my friend/classmate/colleague.” This color-blindness invalidates her identity and life experiences. I want her and all her classmates to have teachers and academic settings which actively, rather than passively, teach about and present as many different cultures and experiences as possible in a manner which instills pride in her history and heritage and respect for, and appreciation of, realities different from her own. It is my mission as a parent to work toward these goals. I also dream these things for myself.