Many expectations come with being black in America today, like the stereotypes that have been enforced since African people were enslaved in this country. Stereotypes play a large part in the psyche of American society; whether you are black, white, Latino, or Asian, there is an image that you are expected to encompass and live up to. In my life, this simple fact has had two sides to it—it seems as if living up to these stereotypes is just as condemning as rebelling against them, and my life has been a clear example of this truth.

Being raised in a black household had an indisputable effect on my personality as I grew up; with my older brother as a role model, I grew up absorbing what was African American culture. With my brother and his African American friends’ influence, I grew up listening to, dressing, and speaking like an African American was expected to in America—not because I felt like it was who I was, but because I felt it was what I needed to do because of what I was. I was force-fed the latest fashions, the newest and most popular music, and taught that to be cool, one must “act black.” This part of me was fiercely combated by where I was raised: a primarily white community and the school I attended, where the majority was white as well.

I would attend school everyday being one of the three African American students in my class, and I would live up to being one of the lone black students. I aimed to be the one to show off the urban music I listened to, or the latest fad in clothing to all of my white friends who didn’t quite understand. I would go out of my way to flaunt the slang I was taught by my African American friends from outside of school. It was only midway through middle school when I took the time to contemplate why I spoke the way I did, the influence of the music I listened to, and why I wore jeans two sizes too large and shirts that hung low to my knees. This was the crucial turning point in my life when I decided that I didn’t want to be the stereotype that those around me expected me to be, that I would take this moment of realization to change and decide for myself who I wanted to be.

From those I knew well, this break from the stereotype set by society was well-received, but from black friends of mine, there was a definite and immediate alienation. By not “acting black,” it was accepted that I was “acting white,” and therefore was not cool. Unfortunately, these relationships were unable to be revived.

Stereotypes are obviously present in America, and stereotypes lead to racism. In my break from black urban culture, I felt as if disassociating myself from the stereotypes of black people relieved me from the racism that went with it. My friends stopped viewing me as their black friend and began to see me only as their friend. But where this new persona of mine helped me to identify with those whom I really wanted to identify myself with, it estranged me from all else. Upon meeting people for the first time, they would see my skin color and be surprised by my refined speech. They would ask me why I spoke so well or be confused by the music I enjoyed to listen to. These questions of my character were as piercing to me as
any racist comment, as it was blatant racism. By acting black, all I was doing was enforcing an age-old stereotype and prolonging racist thoughts toward African Americans, and by not acting black I was met with disapproval and dirty looks. Black people I would meet would take one look at me, see that I was different, and think less of me for it. It took me quite a while to accept who I am and not become offended by either side, what they saw me as and what was expected from me.

In my indistinctness in deciding what race’s characteristics I would most like to possess, I began to disassociate myself from my race, to be whatever I wanted to be without the burden of my skin color deciding who I was. The people I surrounded myself with embraced my racial independence and I felt like stereotypes and racism were things that could never affect me again, until I was shocked back into reality.

My father had told me many stories about instances of racism against him and the disadvantages that his race brought with it when he was a child, but I had never encountered such circumstances until one day in the summer before my junior year of high school. I was walking to a free concert in the park with a friend of mine to see a local hip-hop artist one afternoon when a police car passed us on the street. My friend and I began to joke about how the police car was actually after me, as I was black and my friend was white. To our surprise, the squad car turned around and stopped in front of us in the street. My emotions could only be characterized as stunned with fear as I heard two white police officers ask us if they “could talk to us for a minute.” Scared and confused, my friend and I slowly asked what the reason was and how we were involved. They asked us to walk into the street and place our hands on the trunk of the squad car. As I sheepishly walked over to the police vehicle, I began to put my hands in my pockets and was met with the screams of the male officer to, “Get your hands away from your pockets!”

I was scared and humiliated as they began to search my body for weapons of any sort, and the only sounds I could utter were the words, “Sir, what happened? What did we do?” After being ignored three or four times, we were informed that there had been a shooting at the park earlier and that we “fit the description.”

I was dumbfounded; I never believed that in my lifetime I would hear words as terrifying as those. I was reminded of TV shows, movies, and stories where young black men would be arrested or wrongfully murdered for only the crime of fitting a description. I was a young black man in a residential area, dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a lacrosse camp T-shirt; I didn’t realize I was so threatening. I was scared, I was offended, I thought of my mother who came to America from apartheid South Africa; I thought of my father who was raised on the south side of Chicago. I wondered what they would do in my situation, but I felt helpless; in that moment I thought of the Civil Rights Movement, of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party. I thought of horror stories of racist police officers shooting down young black men only for the reason of being black. As the officer ran his hands up the inside and outside of my pant legs, my arms, chest, and waistband, I saw a crowd begin to form, and three more squad cars arrived as backup. It was my first major run-in with the law and indisputably the most embarrassing moment of my life.

After interrogating us, I was able to breathe again—they released us because
they were convinced that we actually were not the culprits of the shooting at Mellon Park. In my quest for enlightenment in the field of stereotypes and race relations in America, this was a groundbreaking moment. After this warm summer afternoon, it was substantiated in my mind that racism still existed in America and that it was a major problem. It cast a shadow on my opinions of racism and stereotypes and my attempts to beat them. It dawned on me that the way that I saw myself was not nearly as important as the way that people perceived me. Racism is clearly still around and is cemented in my mind by the fact that eight policemen had to stop two young boys only because one was young and black. Incredible steps have been taken towards the end of racism, but although integration has already become part of our society, eliminating racial stereotypes is the next big step towards social equality, and that's monumentally more difficult.