

Is This It? This Can't Be It

Sweets Underwood, A Girl Who Questioned the Norm

By: Emma Anderson

Last week, as Sweets Underwood walked out to the field of Girls Inc., murmurs quickly spread “Sweets is here!” and girls came running across the field laden with hula hoops to wrap their arms around her. Although Sweets left her work at Girls Inc. some time ago, as Assistant Center Director at the non-profit empowering girls to be strong, smart, and bold, the impact she has on communities is evident in the warmth of the welcome. With a crowd of girls wrapped around her, her strength and kindness is clearly magnetic.

However, this scene of girls looking up at her adoringly and finding a safe place in her arms, could not be a more drastic juxtaposition to a scene from Sweets’s childhood. Young Sweets was black and queer and a girl and living in poverty stricken Compton, California and left without a father at the age of two. Surrounded by the effects of oppression she was not yet even aware of, she felt anything but safe. She did not have a role model to run across a supervised field in a pro-girl after school program toward. Yet, these girls undoubtedly felt seen and understood by her. This is because Sweets Underwood has the rare ability to fully exist in a moment, slowing it down, letting go of assumptions, actively listening, and deeply caring for the wellbeing and growth of both herself and others.

Is this it?

As a young girl, Sweets grew up in the heart of South Los Angeles, until the age of ten, when her mom passed away and moved to Compton. When asked about how young Sweets navigated those communities, she pauses, wondering aloud what she wants to share. After a moment, she reflects on how she “never really felt safe,” describing walking to school alone with her sister and passing people using drugs and seeing blood stains on the sidewalk. With two sisters and a brother, she remembers getting to go to Jack in the Box and Carl’s Jr. on occasion as a treat. Of course, she says, only choosing off of the dollar menu.

Yet, in the midst of this upbringing marked by loss and a lack of resources, Sweets continually displayed an inherent resilience and tendency to question the norm presented to her. To young Sweets, the norm was poverty, the norm was a lack of role models, the norm was turning to drugs or prostitution, and the norm was staying in the same place doing the same thing. In reflecting on those norms, she remembers, “I thought that was just what everyone was doing... I thought the whole world was like this, until I didn’t.” Somehow, despite the power of those patterns, Sweets questioned the norm. From a young age, she began to ask the question, “Is this it?” to which she’d get



the inkling “This can’t be it.” But it was just that, an inkling, an internal sliver of a knowing that there must be more.

That inkling was her drive, which manifested in her values for leadership and athleticism. At the end of fifth grade, she gave the graduation speech and continued to pursue leadership in middle school. Teachers at her middle school, attempting to garner student interest in positive experiences, created a miniature Greek life system to promote group belonging and community service. In those mock sororities and fraternities, Sweets rose as a natural leader. She remembers powerful moments of being pulled aside by her teachers and encouraged in her exceptional qualities. The question was, what would be the vehicle that would give those qualities a chance to flourish outside of the oppressed norm in which she was surrounded. Growing up, the stories told again and again presented two options: sports and brains. While Sweets feels she had both, she smiles as she says that basketball was more “intriguing.” Thus, her vehicle of choice was sports.

Are those *your* keys?

Although most who play basketball at a Division I university have their start in the sport at a young age, Sweets did not join the team until midway through high school. Basketball not only ended up taking her to UCSB and eventually around the world, it also introduced her to white people for the first time. Up until the age of sixteen, she had



grown up in communities of color, seeing white people in the media, but never sitting next to them in class or passing them in the grocery store aisle. All of this changed when she went to a basketball tryout in Culver City and found a team of almost all white players. She recalls “My mind was blown open” as the players pulled out their keys after practice and drove off in their BMWs. Thinking back, she almost laughs remembering returning to her community of black and brown folks and expressing the sentiment “They are real! I saw one!” Shortly after, she joined the team and her exposure to and friendship with those white people expanded her worldview. All of a sudden, that question of “Is this it?” and inkling “This can’t be it” was confirmed because she saw lives outside of the norm to which she was accustomed.

How was being raised in Compton a gift?

However, that exposure did not always manifest in an eye opening epiphany of another way of living. During her time at UCSB, only 1.3% of the student body was black (now it has raised to an underwhelming 5%), which sometimes made clear the limitations others dealt with as a result of their upbringing. Specifically, a limitation on perspective that unfortunately reflected back on Sweets at times. The implicit biases and prejudices that filtered the lens people saw her through sometimes limited who they thought she could be. As one of the few black students on campus, it was just assumed she was at UCSB as an athlete first, student second. Although being an athlete came with privileges she makes a point to express gratitude for, like being paired with a

roommate who came from a similar background and academic support, growing in confidence in her identity came with time. She remembers, “I dealt with shame... quite a bit of shame about where I came from and I stopped claiming Compton for a while... I would lie about it... I felt a lot of judgement from the folks I would tell that to.”

In reflecting on how she traded that shame in for gratitude, she describes the process as a “journey of just seeing how where I came from shaped me and all the ways it shaped me. The gift of being raised in Compton, how resilient I was...” Moments when her teammates struggled to overcome stress and anxiety in situations that Sweets was able to maneuver with ease and a bigger perspective allowed her to see that resilience. It also allowed her to rise as a leader on her team and on UCSB’s campus. Taking feminist studies courses for her major and traveling with the basketball team continued to broaden her understanding of the options available to her and gave her a desire to be an advocate for others to know their options too. One way that manifested was in her work around reproductive rights on campus. The mission of the club she was involved in was to give accurate information to UCSB students about the agendas and practices of local crisis pregnancy centers. While in many ways this was just a side project, it shows how everything she does is rooted in questioning the options presented, finding alternatives for herself and others, and, most importantly, a conviction for what is just.

How far can I go and how far can I take those around me?

Despite all the seemingly insurmountable barriers that faced young Sweets, her persistent question asking and resilience led her to college graduation. In June 2013, she graduated from UCSB with a degree in Feminist Studies and that August started her professional basketball career in Germany. She spent almost two years living in a small country town with only about 500 German residents, soaking in the new experience that so greatly contrasted the world she grew up in. Following the end of her second season, she knew that she wanted to return to Santa Barbara and found out about Girls Inc. through some of her friends in the feminist studies major at UCSB. Girls Inc. offered Sweets an opportunity to create pro-girl lessons and teach classes centered around empowering elementary school aged girls to be strong, smart, and bold. More than just that though, Girls Inc. prompted a shift in the type and expression of questions she asked.

Up until that point, Sweets’s questions had been an internal drive for herself, but at Girls Inc. she began verbalizing her questions in the systems and structures she was in. She remembers broaching a question to one of her supervisors because the way something was being done did not sit right with her. She was blown away by their surprised response, they had never thought of it that way. In recalling that conversation a smile spreads across her face as she says, “The moment that I finally spoke up and questioned something for the first time, there was actually no going back for me.” It felt empowering and enlivening. Those questions that had stoked so much change in her life were capable of bringing change in larger systems. People get caught up in the “to say or not to say, to say or not to say” internal battle, and so had she, but when



she finally decided to just say it, there was simply no going back.

Can we engage in conversations around difference without it going south?

Now, Sweets works as a Complex Coordinator, the equivalent to a Resident Director, under UCSB's Housing Services. She oversees apartments, handles conduct, advises student organizations, oversees and delivers curriculum, and supervises RAs. As she reflects on the common thread through all of those job responsibilities she says it's "encouraging folks to engage in difficult conversations involving difference. I think that we live in a time where a lot of conversations go sour because there is not active listening taking place or we're disengaged or invalidating or dismissing someone else's perspective because it doesn't align with our own." In her programs and in conversations with the RAs and folks she works with, the question she often poses is "Can we engage in conversations around difference without it going south?"



Day in and day out, she handles roommate conflicts and mediations, sometimes politically fueled, and she makes a point to "welcome difference, [because] difference is diversity, [and] diversity is what we want on a college campus."

As she talks about her work, questions are woven in to her description of her responsibilities. To name a few:

"Can we drop our assumptions and talk?"

"Can we learn to be with our thoughts in a way where we can actually let them go?"

"Who are you striving for? What are you trying to achieve?"

"Can we sit down and listen to each other?"

Infused in these questions is an earnest ask, genuine curiosity, and no agenda. As a result, it is contagious, reminding people they too have permission to question things. To those who respond to her questions admitting, "I didn't know I could question that," she urges, "In the tiniest of ways, just exercises your voice."

How can I engage in *this*?

When asked if her inclination to question ever is tiring, she seems almost confused by the question. In part, because asking questions is enlivening to her, but also because she is confident in what is worth her time and energy. She has a high value for presence, acknowledging "*This* moment is what life is about," and seems to find a sense of comfort in the assurance that the present offers. Releasing a desire for control over the past and the future, she finds solace, in a way that she couldn't as a girl walking the streets of Compton alone, in the beauty of where she is and who she is with. She expands the common conception of what social justice is, advocating for something beyond posting on Instagram or posing with a quippy sign, saying, "It's a powerful thing to be with another human just as they are. I think most people wouldn't see that as social justice but I completely do." Sweets Underwood's persistence in asking "Is this it?" and knowing "This can't be it" led her, against all the odds, to a beautiful present that she welcomes all who want to join into for a chat.