

To&Through Family Stories



Meet Ms. Sutherlin

Ms. Sutherlin is a Black Chicago Public School (CPS) alumni who grew up in the Westside of Chicago in Austin. She now lives on the Southside with her husband and three daughters. Her eldest daughter is a college student at a private HBCU (Historically Black College or University), her middle child is getting ready to graduate high school, and her youngest child is a high school sophomore.

Navigating the Postsecondary Journey: As a Student

When Ms. Sutherlin was a little girl, she would walk to her neighborhood elementary school. At school, she remembers looking up as her mother walked through her schools' hallways and feeling the powerful energy she radiated, "she was a great presence there." Her mother was an active parent leader and supported the school in any and all ways. When her mother passed early, her father raised Ms. Sutherlin and her brother by himself.

Her brother grew up as a student with a disability and she remembers how her father "had to fight like heck to get him educated." Inspired by her parents dedication for education, Ms. Sutherlin zoned in on the classroom and dove into her books. Thanks to her academic dedication, she was accepted into a competitive academic center program in 7th grade that allowed her to continue in that same Selective Enrollment school for high school.

After excelling on all her essays, group projects, presentations, and exams every single year throughout high school, by the time she was a senior she said, "I was burned out, I was like 'oh my God, get me out of here. I really was tired.'"

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Growing up as a determined scholar, Mrs. Sutherlin had her eyes locked on college. By her senior year, she was awarded multiple scholarship offers that were mailed directly to her home. She excitedly walked into her counselor's office to show her one day, but she immediately could tell that the counselor had to help a lot of her classmates as well. "There were many, many students in need of the counselor's attention."

Mrs. Sutherlin never reported the additional scholarships to her counselor, and decided it would be better to navigate the college process on her own. She enrolled at her dream college and was ecstatic to begin this new journey as a college student.

Ms. Sutherlin moved over 100 miles from home to college. Immediately she saw how the predominantly white institution segregated students. "I felt segregated from the point I arrived on campus. Our dorms were even segregated, and that's a sore point. If you were Black and you were from Chicago, you had a certain set of dorms that you were likely to be assigned to." Despite the unjust campus, she thought back to her parents' resilience and graduated with a bachelor's degree in journalism.

Ignited by both her own and her family's experience in education, Ms. Sutherlin launched her career as a journalist highlighting the educational inequities Black families face. "Looking at my parents and being here today, I was kind of prepped to do a lot of the groundwork...I actually covered education for a little bit of my career as a reporter, I'm quite aware of the hurdles that Black students and parents face when it comes to assuring that we get quality public education."

Now, she continues to be inspired by her mother and said "I would carry on that legacy" and passion for education through her three daughters.

Navigating the Postsecondary Journey: As a Parent

Ms. Sutherlin remembers rushed mornings driving all across Chicago to take her daughters to school. "I would commute across the city, and I literally had three different institutions for quite some time." Despite her hectic commute, she served on various parent committees, and proudly led school tours.

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Now that her daughters are older, she supports her daughters more at home. She currently has been working with her daughter, who is a senior in high school, to navigate the college process. For over 6 months, Ms. Sutherlin has been “dreaming of applications.”

Ms. Sutherlin is familiar with the process, since she navigated it with her eldest daughter not that long ago. She smiles thinking back to the cheers and hugs when opening acceptance letters. However, she has also been stressed when reviewing the financial aid letters.

The letters have been fueling Ms. Sutherlin and her daughter to apply to as many scholarships as possible. Fortunately, her daughter was invited to apply for a full ride scholarship; the only requirement was a video submission. Ms. Sutherlin was ready—she set up a camera, a backdrop and was eager to hit the record button. When her daughter walked in and saw the camera however, she immediately got anxious. The requirement was so distressing that she decided to not apply. Ms. Sutherlin shakes her head and sighs thinking back to that moment, “I was livid... I feel like I failed her. We were kind of just wiped out by that for a while.”

At that moment, Ms. Sutherlin saw how overwhelmed her daughter was. “She was getting a bit stressed out about the whole decision making process.” Seeing her daughter’s feelings also helped Ms. Sutherlin recognize how she, as a parent, felt absolutely exhausted. It also gave her flashbacks on how she felt during her own senior year of high school. The empathy inspired her to take some time to pause and recover.

After taking a brief break from the process, Ms. Sutherlin and her daughter continued to apply and work with her high school’s counselor. “The counselor has been very proactive... The staff is great about letting us know about scholarship opportunities through school links. They encourage us to make appointments.”

After many college visits and seemingly endless paperwork, Ms. Sutherlin and her daughter continue to navigate the roller coaster of emotions the college process brings.

One year later

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Currently in 2026, her middle daughter is now a 1st year college student at a private HBCU in the same region as Ms. Sutherlin's oldest daughter. Both of her daughters were awarded scholarships and she is proud of their accomplishments. Looking back at her experience supporting them she says, "as they examined their acceptance and scholarship offers from a number of schools, I believe that my daughters were equipped to make more informed decisions about where they would enroll in college."

Ms. Sutherlin's Hopes for the field

- **Support Black students to think about their post-secondary options starting in 7th grade.** Ms. Sutherlin recognizes that Black students face "systems that are still stacked unfairly." In response, Ms. Sutherlin recommends earlier support for Black students to start talking about the plans after high school in 7th grade. "It has to be an integral part of the conversation. I'd say seventh grade, right about there is where if you want to support more Black students knowing what they want to do after graduating from high school, whether it's going to college or enrolling in the military or attending a trade school, you need to engage with them about those next steps, right around age 12, age 13. Because I think the earlier you plant that seed, the better."
- **Teach students about HBCU's at younger grade levels.** When Ms. Sutherlin was a senior in CPS, she was awarded a nearly full ride to a public HBCU but never talked about it with her counselor. "I wish that I had been able to talk to my counselor more about HBCUs. But, Ivy League schools and public flagship universities seemed to be highlighted more during my time in elementary school, in high school, and at home. I made my decision with the best information that I had back then." This inspired her to introduce HBCUs to her daughters starting from a young age, and they also toured HBCU campuses. Although she's glad there is more school exposure to HBCUs now, she still encourages schools and parents to start earlier.
- **More parent academies.** After navigating CPS both as a student and now as a parent, Ms. Sutherlin notes how much learning is required and "labor intensive" it is. "Not everybody is able to make those types of sacrifices professionally." She sees parents academies as a way to better equip parents with how they can

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support their child’s educational journey. “Parent academies would be awesome, especially when it comes to finding the right [high] school for your child... Or [talking about why] my child should take algebra in seventh grade if possible. We need that type of hands-on knowledge and support...The end product is having a successfully educated child, you want the child to matriculate. **But the support systems are necessary.**”

- **More direct initiatives to support Black students enrolling at Selective Enrollment high schools.** Growing up, Ms. Sutherlin remembers how diverse Selective Enrollment schools were. Now she sees a [decline of Black students attending Selective enrollment schools](#) and urges action to ensure students of color have access to their choice of high schools. “The numbers of Black students who were enrolled at the selective enrollment schools in certain communities. It's shocking...The numbers are not matching up with the reality of the majority Black and Brown students and CPS.” She emphasized collaborating directly with Black and Brown families on how to prepare and navigate the selective enrollment process through parent academies.