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Booker High principal talks race, perseverance at Embracing Our Differences luncheon

By [Elizabeth Djinis](#)

Staff Writer

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SARASOTA — Booker High School principal Rachel Shelley is known for wearing a big smile and seeming to know nearly every person when she walks into a room.

But at local nonprofit Embracing Our Differences' luncheon Tuesday, Shelley opted to show a different side of herself as keynote speaker. She decided to tell her life story for the first time publicly, she said, addressing an engaged and wide-eyed audience.

“Seemingly unfortunate circumstances have forced me to become determined and driven,” Shelley said. “I have sequestered these feelings for 40 years.”

As a young child, Shelley said she was belittled by her maternal grandmother for being “darker-skinned” than some of her family members. She was also severely injured in an accident at an early age, when a piece of glass from a Coke bottle flew into her eye. Those incidents became formative yet unpleasant experiences for Shelley, leading her to struggle with issues of self-esteem in her childhood.

But her third-grade teacher began to turn things around for Shelley.

“She was the first person that explained to me what it was to go to a college,” Shelley said.

Those life experiences influenced her time as a behavior specialist and principal. She became principal of Booker High School in 2011 and has since placed a priority on college and career readiness for students. Shelley has said she aims to raise the C-rated school's grade but emphasized that she welcomes every and any student.

“We talk about embracing our students; I understand, I get it, I was one of them,” Shelley said. “It’s the effort that makes a difference in a child’s life.”

As luncheon-goers milled about the room at Michael’s on East after Shelley’s speech, the high school principal had what seemed like a receiving line of admirers trailing behind. One was Maria Thacker, who had one simple compliment for Shelley.

“When you tell a story,” she said, leaning in close, “people remember that.”