



He IS Supposed to Be Here: A Conversation with Dr. Don Arnette

Ronda Bowen

Dr. Don Arnette recently authored the book *I Am Supposed to Be Here: The Art of Dealing with Perception*. This book in part chronicles his life and tribulations at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center as the first African American to graduate with a Ph.D. from their doctoral program in cellular and molecular biology. I recently had a chance to talk with him about his experiences growing up, his experiences in the program, and advice he has on young people wanting to be successful.



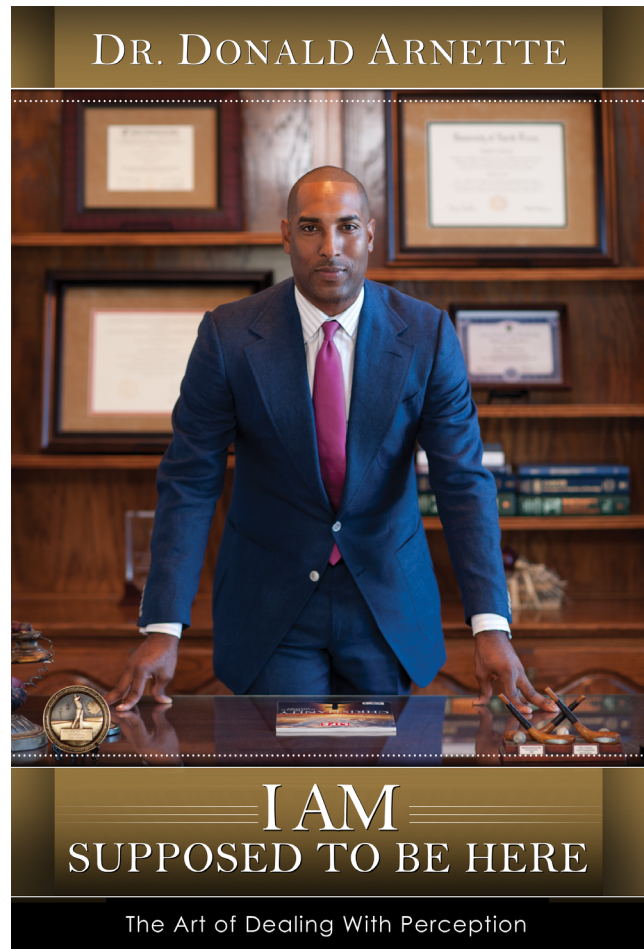
Ronda Bowen (RB): Can you describe your experiences while growing up for our audience?

Dr. Don Arnette (DDA): It was pretty traditional, but a little outside the box for a young minority kid in New Orleans who wasn't well-off... When we settled in Dallas in about 5th grade, my dad bought land and had horses... Around when I was 12, my father asked my brother, sister and I a crucial question. He asked, "How do you want to live when you grow up? I answered with "I want to have a lot of money." My father followed the question up by telling me that to make a lot of money I needed to be a doctor or lawyer, and that's how the seed was planted. In the ninth grade, I started reading books by Ben Carson – only knowing he'd worked his way up to being one of the best neurosurgeons in the world. Other than that, high school was all about basketball. I went to three different schools for college before I finished up at the University of North Texas.

RB: Can you describe your experiences at UT Southwestern Medical Center?

DDA: To be brutally honest, I had no aspirations to go there, I was just a technician doing a job there. I was working with the dean, Melanie Cobb, and she planted the seed that I would be successful and encouraged me to apply to the school. So, I applied and took all the tests to get in, and she called me and told me my acceptance wasn't going well. At the end of the day, they sent a letter saying they were unable to extend acceptance because they were concerned about my commitment, but I could come and attend and be a "special student" and if I did well, I could become a regular student in the spring. I went on to prove them wrong; I went through the first semester and got great grades and then went to the dean's office. The dean said I was officially in the program and, "We knew you could do it; that's why we gave you a chance." I smiled and thanked them, and I learned to take the high road to manage my feelings and emotions and go into the next semester. I kept the letter to remind me.

The next semester, I was walking to the lab across campus when I encountered a university police man. He asked me where I was going. I said, "I'm a



student." The police officer said, "You don't look like you belong here." I responded asking him, "What do you mean I don't look like I'm supposed to be here?" The officer said, "Well look at you...uhhh...you have on sweatpants." When I pointed out a white guy walking by with sweatpants and waved the student over, the police officer let him go. The officer then called for backup, claiming I was being aggressive.... Finally, the officer let me go. It's hard to explain all the feelings I had over the next 24/48 hours. I called my mom and she suggested I file a complaint, and I did. Police officers had to go to sensitivity training and all students were required to carry their IDs with them. When asked what I saw when shown the dash cam video, I said I saw a kid being harassed by a police officer. The school gave me a letter saying there was no wrongdoing, so I went to a lawyer to sue the school.



RB: Your book, *I am Supposed to Be Here* talks about overcoming adversity and misconceived perceptions in your journey to become a doctor. What prompted you to write this book?

DDA: When I was approached to write this book, I didn't want the book to be a racial book. I wanted it to be written in the form of this happened, but it was just an obstacle on the way to becoming Dr. Arnette. Everyone has some obstacle to overcome to achieve their goals. I talk about how I'm not an anomaly. There's a whole group of people who are not supposed to be somewhere – Barack Obama, Oprah, Bill Clinton, the CEO of Yahoo – many people who have achieved great heights who based upon outside appearances don't look like they're supposed to. I wanted readers to get the message to not let anything stop you – and to always take the high road. This is especially important info when it comes to police and race. I believe I'm in a good position to tell people how they should probably handle this, because in 2015 you can get killed when approached. We live in a realistic world and not an ideal world.

RB: Do you have any words of advice to our readers? Anything else you would like to add?

DDA: The best thing that I can tell anybody is first make sure you really think before you speak. Life is really like a game of chess not checkers; you always have to think two steps ahead – if I say A this will happen. We can avoid so many situations if we just stop before we actually react. Second, adversity is going to attack everybody. Everyone has to deal with something; don't let your speedbumps turn into road blocks.

Dr. Arnette's full story is coming up in the Summer Edition of 2016 when he graces the cover of Equanimity Magazine. [E](#)

