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Invisible Voices

Talib D. Williams*

On April 24, 1980, a 16-year-old girl gave birth to a son. On June 28, 1981, an 18-year-old girl gave birth to a daughter. These children, bore by two different young women, were the product of an overzealous young man who was finding paths away from school leading to the streets. I was the son born into this triangle and grew up in Trenton, New Jersey. My father was a scholastic sports phenom and had great potential, but he could not resist the call of the streets. He saw more fame in gang warfare and drug trafficking.

Growing up in the city, I was so used to the day-to-day life living within a warzone that I had no real clue that it was as bad as it was. My mother was able to graduate from high school and received her cosmetic license right out of high school. For me, this was a gift and a curse. With my mother being so young and trying to make the best for us both, this often meant we moved from place to place. I did not stay in one home for more than six months from the age of three to 12. My father was now deeply entrenched into life on the street and did not spend much time with me. When he did, it was usually when he was getting out of jail and, more often than not, it was to get something from my mother. I was never much of his concern.

My childhood was spent growing up alone, with my mother working ridiculous hours and my father supplying the city with bottles and bags of

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sorrow; I went to school merely to eat. My mother was a single child and her mother moved away from family in Georgia, so that side of my family was drastically small. My father was one of 11 children where most of the men of the family were doing all the same things as he, and his sisters were in relationships with men living the same lifestyles as their brothers. That side of the family was too large and the street influence was heavy. Education was never my concern but I did well enough to progress scholastically. Year by year, I saw friends sucked out of school and into the void of the streets never to return. I was always interested in sports, as most youth are, but I had a strong affinity towards baseball. I had enough raw talent to be noticed by the white community and was able to play in more affluent communities than my own. By my high school years, I began to notice how downtrodden my city was compared to the rest of the county. I did not even have a larger view of the world; it was limited to my own tiny bubble. Kids like me had no concerns outside our city or dreams of leaving because they were not accessible to us.

During my high school years, I began to notice every day how much I didn't have compared to all the friends I made through baseball that lived in the suburbs and went to schools that cared about the community around them. These kids were being set up for college since middle school, but I was not told about applying to college until my senior year of high school. I was only afforded this much privilege because I was an athlete. Through unfortunate incidents and injury I lost a scholarship to play baseball at a prestigious Division I school and had no backup plan. I was now scrambling to just get into college with no idea of what to do.

Even as a highly decorated athlete at my school, I had no real mentor. I grew up learning about life at the very instance of making a decision that would make or break me. I was lucky enough to make the right decisions that kept me out jail at a young age, unlike all of my peers around me. If I had someone in my life that could have encouraged me, or better yet, that could tell me right from wrong, maybe I would have been able to make a

decision two steps ahead instead of decisions in the now. There was no one a generation above my own in my city that was willing to do that. We were the zombie generation, children who flooded the streets looking for someone to tell them how to live. The only people who were willing to do that were those who were getting an immediate return from you, and those were the gangs, the drug dealers, and the pimps. We were corrupted early on, and for those of us who did not find their way into school or who did not become an athlete, it was hard to find someone who actually cared. Most of the teachers only worked in my school district because they could not find jobs outside the city. Few of those teachers really cared about the kids learning. Looking back, my city felt like a post-apocalyptic war zone.

After my dreams of playing baseball for a living died, I tried school but it was overwhelming and expensive. I did not know how to apply for financial aid or fill out scholarship applications, so I was paying the maximum out of pocket. I lasted one quarter at a state school. After trying entry-level job after entry-level job, I joined the military. The military gave me the structure I was craving all my life. After many years in the Air Force, I decided to give school another shot (mostly because I was tired of taking orders from people who had no clue that life was hard) and separated.

I once again had no clue what to do about college, but at this point in life, I was mature and determined. I was an adult and felt the pressure of responsibility. As a child I had no responsibility other than myself so it was very easy to give up. Once I figured out how to navigate the administrative side of higher education, I realized I had to give back. I realized that I could not hoard this knowledge to myself or just my own children when there are kids growing up today who are just like I was. I wanted to eventually open up my own mentoring non-profit. During my time at Evergreen, I came across the Gateways program.

Gateways for Incarcerated Youth is a program run through The Evergreen State College that takes Evergreen students to the Greenhill School for boys in Chehalis, Washington to provide access and resources

for higher education through a popular education model. Through this program I discovered a whole new population that is invisible to the public eye. I spent many years in my youth dealing with the prison industrial complex as a visitor to many friends and family, but I never understood the depth of what my friends and family were going through until I met the youth at Greenhill. I will remain active in trying to divert the school to prison pipeline out of prison and back into or never leaving the schools, but I cannot ignore the children who want a chance and who were not provided the chance right in front of me.

I believe in restorative justice especially when youth are involved. I do not believe we need to send our children to prison in order for them to learn a lesson about life. We send them away for time-outs that span decades then expect them to be productive citizens when they do regain their freedom. Until the day juvenile incarceration is eradicated we need to do what we can to give these young men and women of all colors a chance at feeling that their lives have meaning and worth. Education provides that. Knowledge opens the doors to imagination and allows us all to dream bigger than we ever thought we were capable of. If we close those doors, what do we expect the end product to be?

My path to mentoring is based on a desire to give youth a better chance at success than I received—a chance to rebuild community back to the day when everyone felt a sense of self-worth, pride, and caring for one another. If we don't care about giving our children a chance, we do not care about our future as human beings.