



Mentors That Matter

Mentors That Matter is a national project in which youth from four United States cities publicly honor the adults who matter in the lives of teenagers, beyond the home and classroom.

Sponsored by MetLife Foundation, Mentors that Matter is an initiative of What Kids Can Do, Inc., a national nonprofit based in Providence, whose mission is to bring forward the voices of youth about their lives and learning.

In Providence as well as Tampa, Chicago, and San Francisco, high school students worked to identify, interview, and photograph people in their communities who reach out to youth in ways that far surpass what their daily routines require. Forty ninth through twelfth grade students from Central High School and the Met Center in Providence took part.

The resulting narratives and photographs were displayed in a celebratory event and exhibit at Providence City Hall, and students presented each Mentor with a medal of honor.

Selected essays and photographs from the exhibitions in each city appear in the book *Pass It On: Interviews by Youth with Mentors That Matter* (forthcoming, Next Generation Press). For more information, contact info@nextgenerationpress.org.

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Little, and Now They're Big

Me and my friends, we had a lot of fun in middle school. We had a great music teacher that taught us a lot of songs. I thought I wouldn't like singing. Looking back, I liked it. I do a lot of it now. You know, when you're that age you don't want to be different. It was important to fit in. At my school there wasn't a lot of different racial mix. There was one black kid in the whole school, and he was a friend of mine.

I was born in Providence, and when I was fifteen, we moved to North Providence. I went to Classical High School, and I also went to the boys and girls club. The people that worked there inspired me. But I never thought I'd be working with kids. I liked to play baseball when I was a kid, and I thought I'd be a baseball player, or maybe a rock star playin' in a band. My father wanted me to be a doctor. I went to Providence College, where my major was psychology. Then I stayed in Rhode Island.

I didn't think I wanted to work at the club when I got out of school, but I ended up working there. I saw a lot of kids grow up there—a lot of good memories, at that club.

There are always some kids who you connect better with. Sometimes they are the kids who are having trouble—because those are the ones that need the club, you know? Especially kids like you—we could tell you were a good kid, but you had a temper. You were young, you didn't know how to control it. So we kinda

looked out for you a little bit. We tried to help you with it, so you wouldn't get yourself in trouble.

We try to model other behaviors. There's a lot of violence, swearing. I try to model a different way. You don't call kids by their first names, you treat everybody with respect. You try to have kids treat each other with respect.

I've worked with kids for about thirty years. And it's great to see lots of kids grow up into adults. Sometimes I see their kids come to the club, which is nice. And to see guys like you, who were little, and now they're big.



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Follow Your Heart

At sixteen I was troubled—wow, extremely engaged in gang activities. I was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, around drugs, sex, and violence. And those are the same things that the enemy of our soul uses against us today. You go to parties, and some of the things that you see, it's almost unreal. It breeds death, I want to say to our community.

In spite of all the trouble I was in, I just genuinely loved people. I was always told that I was smart. I had a way with words, a gift of gab. So I came to Providence in 1998. I joined the church, went to Bible college, wanted to go out and tell the world about the goodness of God. I had a little church bus and I put a little music and a speaker right on the street corner, with a five-minute message and a little prayer.

I started off as a street worker and one of my responsibilities was 24-hour calls. If there was a shooting or violence at three o'clock in the morning, I would get a call to go to the hospital, to go to a crime scene, to pray with the family, to try to connect the family to some resources. When you build a relationship with people, they come to embrace you.

That has evolved into a lot of different things. I wear a hundred hats. I work as sales manager at Sears and I still put 30 to 40 hours a week into the community. God always makes time for me.

I consider myself a strong community advocate, because I work with youth and families. I birthed my own program, Young Leaders Fellowship, to encourage moral and spiritual values without limitations. I believe

that my life purpose is to breathe life on this young generation.

We try to connect young people to take action steps towards life purposes. When you come into the program, you write a creative plan, you set short-term, long-term goals. Then you meet with your accountability partner. Parental participation is an important part of our mission. The whole thing is restoration of families back to one another, through positive interaction with youth.

Young people are smart, they are sharp. They know when people are sincere. I meet them just where they are. When you give information, it's like a seed going into the ground, it comes up as something good. I have some kids who dropped out, and I got them re-enrolled. The fact that young people are ready to make that change is great. Patience is the key! And heart! Take steps and follow your heart, and your heart will speak into existence.

The whole things is restoration of families back to each other, through positive interaction with youth. Patience is the key!



Simply Flying Kites

When I was your age, I was very uneasy and extremely shy. I was not a good student, because I was an orphan. My father passed away when I was twelve years old. I was very rebellious. Later on I learned how to overcome all of that. I am now 46 years old and I feel amazing. I still have several goals to complete, if God permits.

You can imagine almost anything, but if you don't pursue an education everything will turn out not exactly how you want it. Honestly, I didn't prepare myself to be working in the streets, selling shish kebabs and fried foods. I was always interested in acting and performing, expressing myself.

I acted in a play by Elvis Ruiz, a close friend of mine. At auditions, many young people needed mentoring on how to become better actors and on how to express the character's emotions. How can you love what you do, if you don't love others who do the same? Most young people are artists, and I can offer myself and my art.

I met a seven-year-old girl who was adopted by one of my friends. She was an orphan, like I was. There are children out there feeling the same way that I did when I needed a mentor. One day when I cease to exist, I would like for my daughters and my grandchildren to receive affection from others.

My uncle, who was my mentor, was a dreamer while young. He said: "Nephew, from the oceans to here, everything is earth. And from the ocean on, everything is simply water." For all the wealth, power,

and gold that someone may have, nothing is everything. I learned to fight for what is mine, while at the same time demonstrating no importance to the material things of this world.

I have always wanted to create an event that involves children flying kites, instead of being in the street, influenced by drugs, violence and crime. An activity as simple as flying kites, which is one of my hobbies, would be the perfect opportunity to talk to them about productive things.

At the end, we all end up in the same place. Be humble, be your true self. Learn to say no to violence—it's very challenging for the youth, but learn this. Meditate. Be open to new ideas and always listen to the advice of experienced individuals. Think before acting, because where you stand affects society in one way or the other.

An activity like flying kites would be the perfect opportunity to talk to children about productive things.



Like a For-Real Family

I was the only child. I had all boy cousins, so I am pretty close to them. Some of the stuff I was hanging around was not very good, but when I went home everything was all right. I would choose to go and do dumb stuff, like I would go to my grandmother's house even though she was an alcoholic. My parents would ask how was my stay and I wouldn't tell that my grandmother was drunk, or that my grandfather hit her, or that there was a fight. I wouldn't tell them because I wanted to go back.

Teaching is the most important thing to me. Right now, my kids are my life. I feel like I value each of their personalities—everybody is different. When I'm at home, thinking—it either makes me sad, 'cause I'm thinking about something sad that's happening to my kid, or it cracks me up, 'cause I'm thinking about something funny. We are close, like a for-real family. The other day I went to my godson's ninth birthday party. I love him like he was my own, but while I was there, I missed my kids. I kept remembering certain things I had to tell them.

Sometimes I'm so involved in trying to mentor my students that I'm not taking care of myself. My boyfriend is like, "What about me?" And I'm like, "School!" I don't get to see my parents or my friends a lot, especially if one of my kids has an issue that I'm trying to help them through. When a parent passes away, or is on drugs, or with other family issues that can't be fixed, that's a problem I can't fix and the stu-

dent can't fix. So finding another way to fix it, that's a problem.

I encourage kids to try new things that might be difficult. But I know they will do it. You let them do stuff so that they can overcome their challenges and see how they can be successful. That's cool. I try to get them to talk about the great things they do. Sometimes they can be shy and don't realize how great they are. I see it, so I tell them. Don't be afraid to give a comment—if someone said something smart, say, "Wow, that was pretty smart."

I don't change kids completely. But when you get educated on something, you can't help but change a little, 'cause you change how you see things. I share stuff that I know, or generate some other idea, and that makes them want to do different things. I see changes in my kids from ninth grade to twelfth grade. You're growing up. And certain things in my kids are kind of like me—the way they talk, or the way they act.



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Flowers Out of Nowhere

When I was a kid, I liked music and I liked to write. In high school there was some programs where you can learn a little bit about broadcasting, so when it was time for college I decided to go into television. They wanted me to go in front of the camera but I was a chicken. I went into production, behind the scenes.

Three years after college I decided to try cocaine. I tried it once and became immediately addicted. It took me through dark, dark periods in my life. By the ways of God, I broke the chain, and I've been clean for almost sixteen years. You do the math.

My recovery changed my life completely. It helped me get a job in this field, and I've been doing it for almost ten years. I help young people try to do what it takes to get their lives back on track, if they do end up on drugs and alcohol. We do prevention. We go to the high schools and junior highs and talk about drugs and alcohol.

I do anything I can to help young people to not even try it, not even test. If they don't try it, they don't have to worry about it. Nowadays, you are starting to look silly if you do it. It's becoming cool to be a square. But it's tough out here. Young people have a lot of personal stuff and sometimes they use drugs to escape, which can end up stopping your life and canceling your dreams.

I treat people with dignity, no matter where their choices has put them. They have done some dark things, because addiction makes you change your train of thought. Bad becomes good, in order to get money or get drugs. But as they allow you in, and you are patient enough to meet them where they come in at, they begin to open up and trust, and be willing to learn what it's gonna take.

What makes me happy is to see somebody's life turned around. I see flowers come out of nowhere. People begin to smile. That's my favorite piece of watching change. You can tell when it's real or not.

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It Is About Love

When I was your age, dance was not something you could dream about for the future. It was outside the life I was living. I went to a small Catholic high school with very small classes. My mother is from Ireland, and a lot of the kids in my school were immigrant kids. Many of the kids were not so interested, but the nuns got us into college.

I took ballet classes on my own. I was in love with dance. By then, I met my husband. We knew that we wanted to be artists, and we were interested in both visual arts and dance.

I founded the Everett Dance Theatre with my children. My daughter went to Juilliard and my son went to Trinity. We wanted to make work, that was our first thought. Now we are not really a theater company and not strictly a dance troupe. We are a theater company that uses dance, music, video, film and song.

Our company always worked with kids, in our studios and in schools. One of our first big pieces was called "The Science Project." We met a physics teacher and he organized a science and art program. The kids were called the Leonardos, because they were good in science and good in art. We came in and created a show with the kids and their teacher.

Young people always have been our partners. For the kids who learned their art on the streets, we did not have to send out a notice. They found us. We were very lucky to meet a guy who was an acrobat, self-taught on the streets. He was absolutely beautiful. And we also

found some very talented break-dancers in the community. We wanted a school of diverse kids from all over the city. These kids were ready-made artists.

We brought the older company and the younger company together, and made a beautiful piece called "Somewhere in the Dream." That was very challenging, the older company working with the younger company on stage. We talked about race and class, the clashes of racial groups, pop music and classical music. We made a collision between all that, a kind of collage of the world. It was like common ground.

You have to find someone who appreciates your gift, even if it's only a friend. But if you find a place like our Carriage House School—a place that appreciates your talent, puts it on stage and turns the lights on—that is even better. Now we have a whole bunch of kids that are part of our mentorship program.

It is about love, it is about the relationships that you develop. They become so dear to you, you see them grow up. They are a family for the rest of your life.



Start Your Own Flow



You have to get through it: see the obstacles, and look forward, and imagine how you are going to be happy. Eventually you are going to learn.

It was not easy for me in high school, coming from an immigrant family. I was a kid who you would consider popular. I always wondered why there was so much animosity between teachers and students, and students and students. In Central High School, I was just walking around, wishing that someone would push you along. A couple of teachers would sort of push you along, but I wished for more. It was a little bit like home. I just didn't listen. I thought I knew it all, but then you realize you do not know it all.

My father was my role model. He asked me about my talents, he asked me to show off my interests. It did not matter who you were, or what you wanted to do with your life. He asked me to show him who I was, and tell him all the wonderful things about myself. He would ask me to put to use the talents I had. After a while, you start believing and seeing these talents about yourself, and pushing off all the negative things. You say, "Wow!".

Now I am in college, and it is not what I thought it was going to be. I thought it was going to be so hard, crazy, and stressful. I go to school and I work. I am taking classes that I know I have to take, to make myself the best I want to be. I am enjoying knowing that I am becoming a better person, and enjoying everyone around me. I am planning to graduate as a secondary education major, so that I can be a high school English teacher for a while, and work up to a principal and maybe even a superintendent.

I am motivated to work with young people. Before that, I want to travel to different states and different countries and look at their education systems, to bring back to my own city what I learn. I want to give back something.

I just want youth to know that the present is the present. You just have to get through it: see the obstacles, and look forward, and imagine how you are going to be happy. You have to go beyond your neighborhood, go beyond your family. Eventually there is going to be a better ending. Eventually you are going to learn, and not let anyone be the end of you.

Everyone goes through things in life. Just keep pushing through. Instead of fighting, just go with the flow. You got to start your own flow. I want youth to know that.



Work to Your Limit

Never in the whole entire world would I have thought I was going to become a Rhode Island senator. I was like any other teenager: I liked to have fun, find out where the parties were at on the weekends, have a boyfriend and sneak out of my house. I was doing exactly what you guys are doing now! Except we didn't have the technology you guys have.

My mother raised four children by herself. And later, becoming a single parent of five children myself, I had to face so many challenges. When you take care of children, they depend on everything you do—education, support, putting food on the table, molding them with character to become later a good citizen. Sometimes I have to put my own goals aside because I have to place my kids' needs and goals first. But eventually that frustration becomes energy that makes me reach my goal and my dreams.

When I was doing my 2006 campaign, teenagers in the neighborhood were a very important piece of the process of getting me elected. They were door-knocking, making phone calls and working on Election Day, and so many other things. Most of the teenagers I have around me are not even eighteen years old, and I see in them the skills, the desire, the attitude to be leaders and eventually replace me.

Young people teach me a lot, their initiative and how they are open-minded and hungry to learn. You don't know until you sit with them, you talk to them, and you see what they want. Because they were asking

me questions but were telling me also what they wanted. They need to have somebody leading them in some directions, and I want to take the action.

The earlier that teenagers can learn about politics, the better citizens they can be in the future. Right now, I try to be the bridge. Any kids who approach me and want to be an intern, want to be working in the State House or to know more about politics, I open my office for them. I'm planning different activities for the summer, getting the teenagers busy so that they don't have any opportunities for thinking of doing wrong things. I want them to have opportunities for jobs. I want to pay the teenagers so that they could participate in cleaning the neighborhood, learn about politics, and also get some money for their personal expenses.

The human being has to work to your limit of strength and effort to reach what you want. I don't believe in things that are mild. You have to go to one side—either you are, or you are not. The teen age is very fragile, and there's a lot of temptation. I want to see young people really understand the difference between choosing the right and the wrong thing. Sometimes, just a second can change a life.

Teenagers were a very important piece of the process of getting me elected, and I see in them the skills, the desire, and the attitude to eventually replace me.



To Keep Things Real

When I was your age, I played a lot of baseball and basketball. And I used to go to the South Providence Recreation Center. I started working with kids there. Joe DiStefano, the principal at Central High School, was my mentor. He would come to the center and take off his suit and put on his coveralls. He cut the grass to make sure that we would have a decent place to play.

I had to sacrifice my social life, so that I could play sports and keep my grades up. I could not do what a lot of my friends did. Half of my peer group graduated and went off to college, the military or work. The other half are dead or in jail. My goal was to graduate and go to work. A teacher I knew got a coaching job at Roger Williams College, and he called me about playing basketball for him and going to college.

I came from a poor family, so education was very important to help me get out of poverty and to pass on the same to my children. From a spiritual perspective, I have been blessed, and I have to share that with others. You have to help out people.

I do worry about this generation growing up too fast and not enjoying childhood and adolescence. You are going to be working for the rest of your life. There are too many people worrying about material things. Material things can't make you happy. The kids of my generation also had more respect for their parents. It hurts me when someone cusses out his mother in front of me.

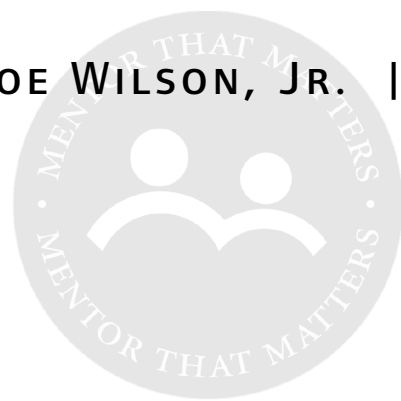
The most important events in my life are my graduation from high school and college. It was wonderful to see the joy in the eyes of my father, my grandfather and grandmother, and the pride that they had for me being the first in the family to graduate from college. They worked hard in low-paying jobs all their lives, and it was a dream come true to them. That was my proudest moment.

I love young people. I received a card in the mail from a student I knew, and this young man sent me a card inviting me to his Eagle Scout graduation. He wrote me how much I had done for him, but I could not remember most of the details. All I did was give him a little encouragement: "How are you doing, are you keeping your grades up?" Mentorship is providing direction, encouraging and sometimes a little chastising to get people back on the track.

It is all right to correct someone to help them, but it is another thing to scream at someone to tear them down. When I do it, it is to try to shake them a little bit and to lift them up. That's my goal: to encourage young people to see their own potential. I want to keep things real.



I worry about this generation growing up too fast.
Material things can't make you happy.



I am here to give you permission to be real with me. When a kid opens up, she gives others permission to have courage, to be human, to be authentic.

Art Teaches People How to Be Better People

I really wanted to be the mayor of New Orleans, where I am from. I was going to be a lawyer and be involved in public service. But I got bit by the theatre bug in college, and there was something about being a lawyer or a politician that seemed to limit me.

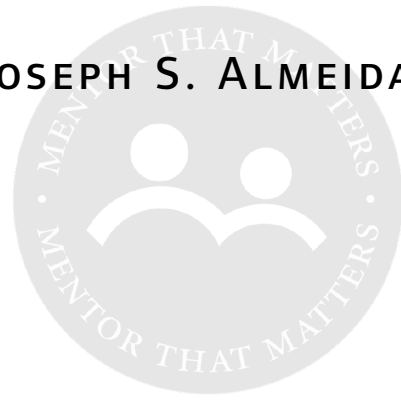
My folks wanted me to do better than they did. Especially in a community like mine, the art was always a luxury. My parents always said to go to school and be a doctor, a lawyer or a teacher. You will have a family to support and you have to make money, they told me. When I wanted to be involved in the arts, they said: “What! You can make money from that?”

After they put their souls on stage several times a week, most actors want to be alone, to disengage from the community. For me, it is the opposite. I love what I do on stage, I love engaging in that way. But when I get off stage, I want to continue to be engaged in the community, and also feel so passionate about what I do. For the past ten years, something was missing for me—public involvement, to help shape the community, hands on. The part of me that wanted to be a politician was not fulfilled. Coming to a place like Trinity Rep, I knew I had a job. Now I am able to focus on my work and also do some of the things that I was driven to do before I decided to become an actor.

I love to work in a classroom with young people. I have nothing to hide; my life is an open book. I am here to give you permission to be real with me. When you meet real people, that is contagious. That is the job for

a teacher. In a group of kids in a classroom, when one kid opens up, she gives others permission to have courage, to be human, to be authentic. That opens possibilities for you guys—not to cram you into a box. Smart, stupid, Dominican kids here, kids who are poor here, kids who have little bit more money over there.

Art has not always been a luxury. For our ancestors it was the only way to communicate, a way to express ultimate pleasure and pain. Art comes out of the most beautiful and the most awful in life. It is my responsibility to share this knowledge with young people, not using a gun or harmful words. The reason for going into classrooms to work with kids is not to encourage anyone to become an actor. Art is the one profession on the planet whose techniques and tools teach people how to be better people. It teaches you how to listen to the world around you, how to love every aspect of the world around you, how to dream, how to imagine.



Someday you will be sitting in my seat and answering the questions for someone else, thinking of ways to help others.

Sometimes Not All Those Laws Make Sense

I am a state representative. I represent Washington Park and the South Side of Providence, about 14,000 people. Right now, I'm the chairman of the Rhode Island Minority Caucus: Asian, Hispanic and African-American folks. I make decisions that affect the whole state, decisions based on economics, civil rights, labor rights, housing, and medicine. You name, it we do it!

I grew up on the South Side. My mother worked, and I worked. School helped me a lot. I learned that you have to have imagination, you have to have discipline. Make a plan for tomorrow and not today, because tomorrow is today.

I did not want to be a politician at first. People came to me when I was a cop, and asked me to be involved. But in police work you enforce laws, and sometimes not all those laws make sense. As a legislator, I get a bigger picture. I argue laws, amend laws, and create new laws. I see both sides.

There is a lot of work to be done, and seeing the results is important. For example, as a cop, I was able to help a family struggling with drugs and sensitive family issues. They are all doing well today, and the son keeps in touch with me. As a politician, right now we are meeting and working on funding schools. I am able to see the results of what I am doing.

For me to get to where I am today, many different people helped me when I was your age, and served as mentors. You have to make time for this kind of connec-

tion with young people. I do it willingly; you do not want to be a politician and not make connections. To be a good mentor, it is important to listen. I usually work with students at Brown University or CCRI [Community College of Rhode Island]. This is the first time I am talking to someone who is in high school.

I have influenced a few young people to go into politics—some have gone to political science programs. But I influence more young people to do better in business, in education, or the military—not just politics but across the board. You are the future. Someday you will be sitting in my seat and answering the same questions for somebody else, thinking of ways to help others. To know that you two will live good lives is very important to me.



You have the voice. If you do not tell your story, someone else will. You know your story better, and you can tell it best.

Stories Are Breathing

Working at a day care center in South Providence, I discovered storytelling as a teaching tool. I would ask children questions: “You ride a bike, what color is your bike? Where do you bike? You had an accident, and you had stitches—tell me that story.” After that, they got to tell their own story again, but this time I would not ask the questions. I want people to realize: You have stories, you have the voice. If you do not tell your story, someone else will. You know your story better, and you can tell it best.

When I was growing up, my parents were separated, but there were positive male role models around that helped me to get through rough spots in my life. I realized how important it was for young children to have male teachers. There are enough men out there with basketballs, hockey sticks, with weapons. But we do not see men promoting nurturing things: reading, education.

I think we all need more mentors. I could find trouble as a kid, but I had to go look for it. But for you kids, trouble comes knocking at the door, trouble comes on the computer, trouble comes over the phone. So I try to find stories that help people deal with their lives, the rough spots that face students today. There are some wonderful tales from Africa dealing with strength. People confuse strength with being a bully. A bully has a crack in his character, and a crack is a weakness, not strength. Real strength is about the inner self.

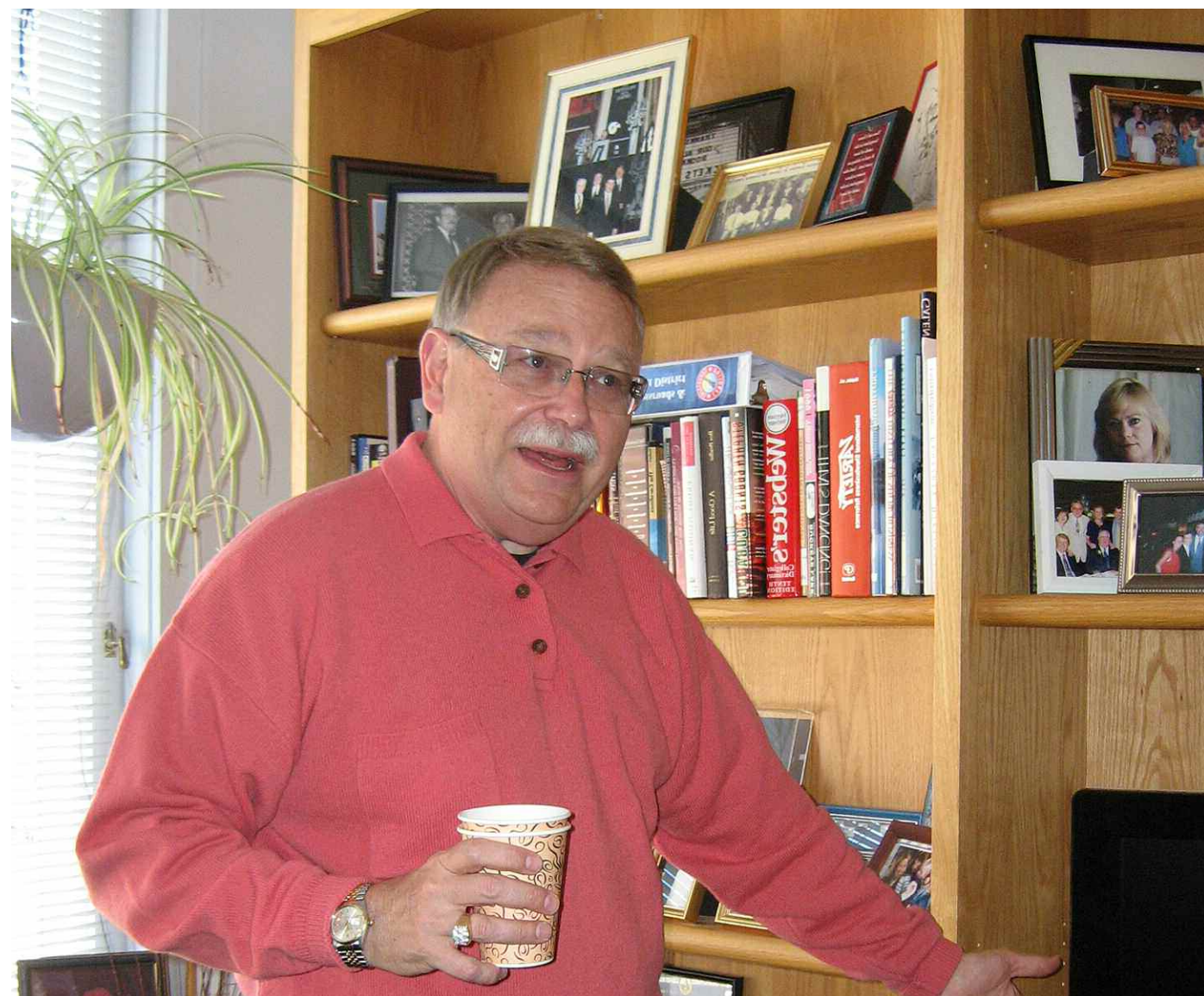
I encourage young people to interview their parents and grandparents and listen to their stories. When we connect to the elders in the community, we can get wisdom. There is an African saying, “When elders die, it is like a library burning.” No matter what culture you are from, your ancestors told stories. So when we tell stories about our weekend, we are doing something that people have been doing ever since the beginning of time. People have always eaten and they have always told stories. That connects us to our history.

I have been telling stories for thirty years. I do not care how old the listeners are, you can feel and see how they, too, experience the story. You are not passively listening, you are actively participating, you are using your imagination. You have to visualize the characters, the movement—and on top of that, the empathy that you may have for the character, the wondering, the trance that we go into as we listen. It’s a lot of work for the mind. You sit listening to a story, you get tired!

That is why stories are so important, as opposed to sitting and watching television or music videos. All that stuff has stimulation. Stories are breathing. You are affecting the stories. Feel that! Think that!



Nobody Starts Out Very Cool



I try to do what is right, hiring young people for entry-level jobs. You got to come from somewhere. Nobody starts out very cool.

I had a professor in grad school, a kind of a Mr. Chips type. All the misfits were assigned to him. One day he said to me, paraphrasing a quote from Bob Dylan, “Mr. Singleton, figure out where you want to end up, so you do not end up where you do not want to be.” I always thought about that. It really rings true, not only in your professional life but also in your personal life. Only you can figure that out, especially at your age. Peer pressure is enormous and in some ways it does not change, even in the business world. Everyone succumbs to it at some point in their lives.

When I was your age, I wanted to be a coach. And basically I’m still doing that, but now, I coach people in business. Our business requires collaborative work: when you produce a show, you have an art director, a scene designer, an artistic director. Every manager has a style, and none are right or wrong. Some are very command-and-control, like the military. My background was higher education, so my tendency is to be very collegial. I understand the issues and I try not to be disruptive. You have to work in such a way that when the audience comes in, they don’t see the wrinkles.

I call it nobility, working with and for young people in this kind of business. I try to do what is right, especially with young people. I do it on a strategy level, like hiring young people for entry-level jobs that lead to new experiences. For example, in the front office we have a part-time person in the morning. Every year I hire a student to be the afternoon person. I have this

application process, and we get five or six kids. Then I watch how they come through the door. We select one for 20 hours a week, and the ones that are left over and have a good skill set, I channel them to the box office. You got to come from somewhere. Nobody starts out very cool.

To reach young people to come to Providence Performing Arts Center, we do a community outreach program. We created an arts showcase with local arts organizations, and have middle school kids come in five to six times a year. We do a summer camp, “Camp Broadway,” which in many ways is the Harvard of Broadway. We have local foundations that subsidize two dozen scholarships for middle school students, which they can use for any arts-related program in the summer. You mentor young audiences through opportunities like this. We do not yet know what the long-term impact on these young people will be. But if you do not do it, you never know.



Every Day, Every One

I originally thought I wanted to be a nurse, and somewhere along the way, I realized I didn't have the stomach to do it. I decided to work with kids. I thought I would work with special ed. But that didn't pan out the way I expected, so I went into regular education. This is 22 years now.

I found out that I enjoyed the older kids more than the younger kids. I've been working in San Miguel Middle School for seven years, and I love every minute of it. I don't find it difficult to teach different subjects. I don't think I would want to teach reading only. I get bored really fast, I like the change. It gives a different taste to the day.

I try not to bring my job home, but because I enjoy it so much it's hard not to. Both good and bad. I enjoy grading papers, but it's not my favorite thing to do. I try to get them done really quickly, not only because the kids don't want to wait, but because I want that out of my way. If you're on the top of the pack, I'm probably grading you easier than if you ended up on the bottom of the pile. But by the bottom of the pile, I'm really tired of seeing everybody get the same thing wrong, and I get really ticked.

Your class was one of the best years I have ever had teaching. It was wonderful, fun. Everybody got me, which means that I could be myself. And you all understood me, even when I got angry. It was a very difficult

graduation to see you guys go. Once somebody walks out of this building, it's not as easy to keep track. You never really know what impact you make. So I'm glad to see that you come back. It's always a delight to see you guys walk through the door.

I hope that I made a positive impact. But the kids I work with also have an impact on me—every day, every one. Sometimes I do go home with a headache, and they give me a whole new energy.



Once somebody walks out of this building, it's not as easy to keep track. You never really know what impact you make. So I'm glad to see that you come back.



A Quest That Goes On Forever



Because I got to know Judy, I began to understand how to work with her in an artistic way. She started to grow, hugely.

To me, the mentoring relationship means when someone consciously says, “I see potential in you, and I would like to help you reach it.” Before I came to Providence, I was the associate artistic director for the 52nd Street Project, a New York theater that creates original plays, collaborations between adults and youth from the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood. I taught playwriting to nine and ten year olds, which was very fabulous. You would not believe the genius plays that nine year olds can write. I directed teenagers in Shakespeare productions, and I produced many plays written and co-produced by young people.

At the time I was 21 years old, and many of the people in class weren’t much older than I was. So it was a struggle to respect me. They were a bunch of real tough cookies. One was a Dominican girl, a little scrappy thing with a lot of learning disabilities, not articulate but a very poetic, beautiful young woman. Judy was always in trouble: coming to rehearsals stoned, late, or blowing off class. I worked very closely with her over the two years, and because I got to know her, I began to understand how to work with her in an artistic way, as a director. She started to grow, hugely. She started to come and be there consistently. She started to grow as a performer, to shine in class. When we did Shakespeare’s “The Tempest,” Judy got cast as Miranda, the young ingénue character.

She had a really hard time learning the text. We

would pace back and forth, shouting the lines. We were rehearsing in a garden and there were some BBC reporters who wanted to interview the cast. She was Miranda, so they talked to her first. I was sitting there with her, and she reached over and grabbed my hand and took a deep breath and started to talk. I can just cry thinking about it. She started to speak about her experience and how it changed her life. I will remember that moment forever.

As the associate director of the Black Rep, I am in charge of the theater season. I produce the season, cast the plays, and select the designers, the directors. Not only do I get to hire people, but I work with them to make sure that every show comes out in a way that expresses why we chose the play in the first place. I make sure that everyone is doing what they are supposed to be doing, when they are supposed to be doing it, which is the hardest part. There is a creative aspect to it, too.

The play that we are doing now has teenage characters, but it is also about human relationships, people looking for connection and people feeling alienated. You know that feeling when you are looking at stars and feeling really small, but it is also beautiful, you have that longing inside of you and you are figuring out what it is and what you want and who you are? Believe it or not, that is a feeling that goes on for your entire life. That is a quest that goes on forever.

Getting in the Ropes

I was about twelve years old when I first tried Double Dutch, in Barbados. I taught myself, outside with the girls. When I was 28, a friend in Providence re-introduced it to me. I loved it. Our team started training for competitions. From then on, I just ran with it.

Three years ago, I started out with my own Double-Dutch team. It's a passion—I love my kids, man! I paid to get the team started, out of pocket. Now it's growing, it's doing good, and we have sponsors and do fundraisers. I work with kids ages eight to nineteen. Their age doesn't really matter—either you got it or you don't.

If you make it hard, then it will be hard. Practice makes perfect. You have to get in and out the ropes, and you compete in speed, compulsory, and freestyle. The easiest thing is getting in and out the ropes. For speed, you jump for two minutes without stopping, at a consistent speed. Compulsory consists of jumping eight turns clockwise, eight counter-clockwise, two criss-crosses, and ten high steps. Freestyle is really hard—you dance, do flips, and do acrobatics in the ropes. You really have to practice on that to get good.

You can tell a lot about a kid from how they jump rope. When they do a trick they could never do, their self-esteem just rises. I had one student who was having problems at home. I told her she could do the tricks—she just had to keep her mind off her problems.

Now she is one of my best jumpers. She still has problems at home, but when she gets in the ropes, she forgets about them.

The kids learn to respect themselves and others, and to just “be you.” In this business, everybody has a different personality. I don't call it bad, it's just their personality. When they do something they are not supposed to do, I give them push-ups.

It's important to me to be a mentor to these kids. If I had a mentor, back when I was that age, maybe someone would have pushed me into accomplishing all my goals sooner. I rearranged my class schedule in college, to dedicate at least two days a week for them.

Everywhere the kids go, everybody wants to see them perform. We do a lot, and we're going to do so much more.



You can tell a lot about a kid from how they jump rope. When they do a trick they could never do, their self-esteem just rises.



Good Things to Teach

When I went to school, they were real strict. In those days, they sat in rows and you just did a lot of work, all by yourself. I didn't think school was much fun. I would get bored, and I thought some things were unreasonable. I used to get in trouble.

When I would play school, I would always have kids coloring and playing. That makes the best teachers—you put more into it, to make it more fun. So that's what I tried to do. I always wanted to be a teacher.

When I started, I took first grade, then I taught third, fourth, and sixth. I like sixth the best. I've been teaching sixth grade for seventeen years. I teach everything except science.

We get along pretty well. Kids know that there's a line—I'm their teacher first, but I care if something's upsetting them. We have fun. They laugh when it's appropriate, and we kid each other. And we know when to stop—when it's time to serious up.

Sometimes I don't like what I do. I don't like how the report cards are. We grade A-B-C-D, and they have a little space to comment. I'd rather do a narrative—in some ways, that's better.

I try to teach kids things that are important, to make them grow up as better people. To be more thoughtful, take care of themselves, each other, and the world. That's good things to teach.

Kids know that there's a line—I'm their teacher first, but I care if something's upsetting them.



I Have the Law

My inspiration comes from my dad. He was Mayor of Pawtucket from the time I was eight until I was sixteen. I grew up with politics, knowing that it was important. Politics back then was fun, more old-fashioned. Now it is a lot of computers. It does not demand as much manpower as it used to.

I chose this job knowing that attorney general is the toughest political job. Friends can have a point of view. I have the law. Philosophically or emotionally, I might want to be someplace else, but you have to be consistent. Behind all that, you are using the law in this job, doing anything you can to make things better. You can send a message that you care. You are helping people both personally and professionally.

Any opportunity to impact juvenile crime, I take. My office handled 4,000 juvenile cases last year. We can save more youth, we can keep more out of prison, and we will all be better off. The motivation for the bill that I put in, linking teenagers' driving privileges to school attendance rates, goes back to juvenile justice. Statistically, 75 percent of criminal cases happen during school hours. That screams at us that we ought to make sure that kids go to school. I can wag my finger, parents and teachers can wag their fingers, but kids will not always listen. We've got to keep you in school.

I go to at least one school a week, just to talk, so kids will look at me or at the police in a different way. I try to break down those barriers, to join organizations and programs, to cheer kids on. Every statute says that

if you lose a kid, if they go down the wrong path, they will struggle coming back, and the cost to our society will be more.

I have 96 attorneys that are in court right now. Tens of thousands of cases come through here, we are in court every day. We put people in jail—kids too, more and more—for a longer period of time. In front of my building, you will see a sign that says “Justice for All” followed by the last line in the Spiderman movie: “With great power comes great responsibility.” I use that with kids when I speak, because I have enormous powers in the law. Just charging someone can change a kid's life, like not being able to go to law school. The balance is the great responsibility. You go home and you ask yourself, “Have I done justice today?”

Public service is great. I love doing something that is real. I would say to someone your age: Study first, and then participate in a couple of different ways. People really do not understand how much your voice matters. Get involved in politics. Go to the legislature. Go to the city council where you live. See if you like it. And if you do not like the people in office, get them out of there!



We can save more youth, we can keep more out of prison, and we will all be better off. If you lose a kid, they will struggle coming back.



They told me I couldn't win a game at Central because the kids are not smart enough, or are distracted. Well, I proved them wrong.

Boys into Men

I always loved playing football, like most of the coaches that I played for. I grew up in New York City and attended Springfield College on a recommendation by my physical education teacher. I was really athletic, and we felt a little school would give me more playing time. I played football for two years, starting as the quarterback. When it was my time to stop playing, I wanted to stay involved in the game.

I decided to coach here at Central because it reminds me of the type of kid that was in my neighborhood. Growing up in the projects in Manhattan, I loved a challenge. They told me I couldn't win a game at Central because the kids are not smart enough, or are distracted. Well, I proved them all wrong. I took a team that had not won a game in two years to the Super Bowl, and we made the playoffs in the last few years. I think we can win at least eight games this season, and will make the playoffs easily. The goal is to go to the Super Bowl and win.

I love coaching the kids. I believe a team has to be like a family. We have to protect each other, and I teach that concept to our players. We even have family talks and family time. We go to the movies together and the Patriots games together. Sometimes you just have to show the kids you care.

I am very happy to be a high school football coach. I am here to coach boys into men. You can do that in sports, especially football.



Not Left Out of the Conversation

At eighteen, I was totally interested in theater. I was fascinated by language, and I think I was accepting beauty in human beings—physical beauty and spiritual beauty. You sit on a bench and look at people and see beauty and style. If they got it, I figured, I must have it too.

The theater was telling me to have confidence, and confidence means being prepared: read, listen, and learn. I do not learn by sitting, I learn by watching. I was blessed that I worked with brilliant artists. I got to see them in their process, and some of the language I heard was amazing. I had to find out what they were saying. I did not want to be left out of the conversation.

Young people find out very quickly that I care about them, that I respect them. The door is open, but expectations are the same for everyone. I expect excellence, discipline, thought. I can be tough, and sometimes young people run away from my expectations. Challenge can scare them off.

Young people can confuse attitude with power, but attitude empowers the other person. If you have a chip on your shoulder, a more teachable personality will get the job. If you cannot say please and thank you, you are going to have trouble. The quickest way to fall out of favor with me is when they are disrespectful.

I do not ask if you are going to college, I start by asking where you are going to college. The challenge: What is my part of getting you there? I tell my sons not

to look around for fairness. Fairness is something you can give to others. The person who gives it will more likely receive it.

I feel great sadness when I work with young people in prisons. There is a lot of brilliance there. It costs \$35 thousand a year to keep someone in prison. It takes a lot of people to keep prisons going. It is about economics, and you can only defeat it by never becoming a part of it. If you are not willing to be the man, then you are giving someone else the right to do it.

Not everything in the world is dark. If you only know darkness or fear, you will not feel what it feels to be respectful, decent and nurtured. I teach you to keep the sad and the bad stuff at the door. You cannot come to my world with profanity and disrespect. You cannot surround yourself with negative stuff. You can come in, and I am going to work with you, and pretty soon you will begin to see the kind of the world we all want to live in. In this world, and in this time, when you are with me you will be safe.



I tell my sons not to expect fairness. Fairness is something you can give to others. The person who gives it will more likely receive it.



The Power of Music Is to Make It Your Own

My violin teacher in high school had a unique way of looking at music, and he really believed in me. He did not emphasize perfection. He would say, “Music is a lifelong study. Whatever anyone says, it doesn’t matter. It is about you and your lifelong journey.” He made me aware that whatever happened, I could always get better as a musician and living my life, and have that be part of my playing.

My English teacher, junior year, encouraged me to do a lot of journaling in class. I was going through a lot, getting into arguments with my parents about this and that, and he was really a source of comfort because he encouraged me to pour it out in my journal. He would read my writing and he was not judgmental. He didn’t get into the stuff with me, or promise to help me solve the problems. He believed in me and provided an outlet for me. He saw that I had a connection with music, and how the power of music is to make it your own and use it in your own way.

A few students started with us at Community MusicWorks at the beginning, and stayed in the program until they graduated high school. One was a kid named Marconi, whose mom saw that there was an art program in the community and signed him up. When he was thirteen, he began to get into trouble and miss lessons. I made sure he came back, and something switched. He got more and more into music, and he

went to a summer music camp on a full scholarship. We got him ready by working on a piece, and then he played that piece with our quartet as a guest artist.

I started the new fellowship program at Community MusicWorks. Our waiting list for the program was like two years, and we knew we had to do something. Sebastian and I were getting calls from different places around the country, wanting to know more about how we do what we do, and interested in doing the same thing in their cities. So we decided to do the Fellowship Program, and we hired two musicians to come to work with us for two years, so we could move from 65 students to 100.

Kids from all over the world were in that summer camp, and Marconi realized that if he plays music, it is like speaking a new language. That was really big for him. In his college essay, he wrote how his ideas about the world had changed. He went off to college, and his mom was really proud, because no one in his family had ever gone. I think his experience with Community MusicWorks showed him that he can really succeed, if he wants to and if he puts his mind to it.

A lot of students start when they are young, but we do have high school kids who have never had music lessons before. We think that some of the most powerful people at Community MusicWorks are our students—and Marconi was our first.



When Marconi was thirteen, he began to get into trouble and miss lessons. I made sure he came back, and something switched. He got more and more into music.

* Minna Choi’s words appear in italics, Sebastian Ruth’s words in roman type.



Maybe You Did Some Good

When I went to college, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I thought about wanting to be a teacher, but I was very nervous, because when I was in high school I had a lot of teachers that I did not especially like.

In college I ended up taking classes that had to do with literature and education, so I figured I will take a shot at it. I decided that I would go back a couple of times a week to Hope High School, the school I graduated from, and stay in the classroom with one of the teachers, to just see what was going on.

I was not a student teacher. I came in to make sure that I actually did want to work with teenagers, that I did want to be in the classroom. So after doing that for a few months, I gradually made up my mind that I would go for it. I applied for the teaching program and started to take all of the classes that I needed to become a teacher.

I picked high school teaching because I remembered that was the time period when school was more important to me. The truth is, I was something of a troublemaker. I was skidding into trouble. The turn-around for me was actually my junior year, when I ended up going to the Essential school at Hope. That was a change; we started to deal with more serious lessons and studies.

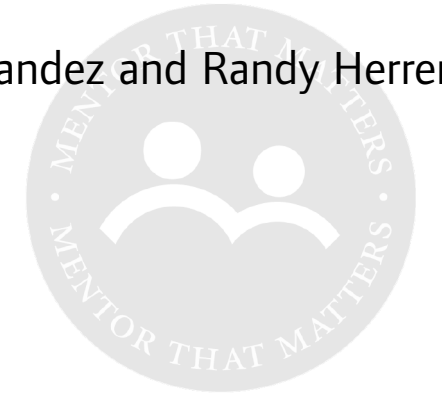
I definitely had teachers there that I went to a lot for conversation—to talk about books, and to ask

questions about how to deal with things in life. I was close to my English teacher, my history teacher, and my math teacher—they all made a difference to me. They had a big influence on me.

Being a teacher, you aren't really sure if you are having an impact on your students. That is one of the frustrations, sometimes. You even worry that you are having a bad effect. A lot of times it is not until a year, two years, or three years later that you know how maybe you did some good. Sometimes you do not find out until years later, like in your case. I did not know for sure that I had some positive impact on you. I was surprised and honored that you wanted to interview me.

Being a teacher, you aren't really sure if you are having an impact on your students. It is not until later that you know how maybe you did some good.





Many More Lives

I was focused on basketball when I was your age. I think basketball was for me what art is for you. I had my parents supporting me through the college process. In some ways, I was a perfect student for College Visions. I was lazy and shy—capable of a lot, but really in need of someone to push me to challenge myself. My basketball coach in high school ran a really precise offense, and he wouldn't hesitate to get on you if you didn't do what you were supposed to do. But at the same time, he was constantly boosting my confidence.

Right now I direct a nonprofit college access program called College Visions. The main point is to provide college admission coaching to students who wouldn't be getting that support. We help students with college visits, getting college essays together, fee waivers, everything that goes into applying to and getting into college, which can be a really daunting task. I know it was, for me. Without my mother, it would have never happened.

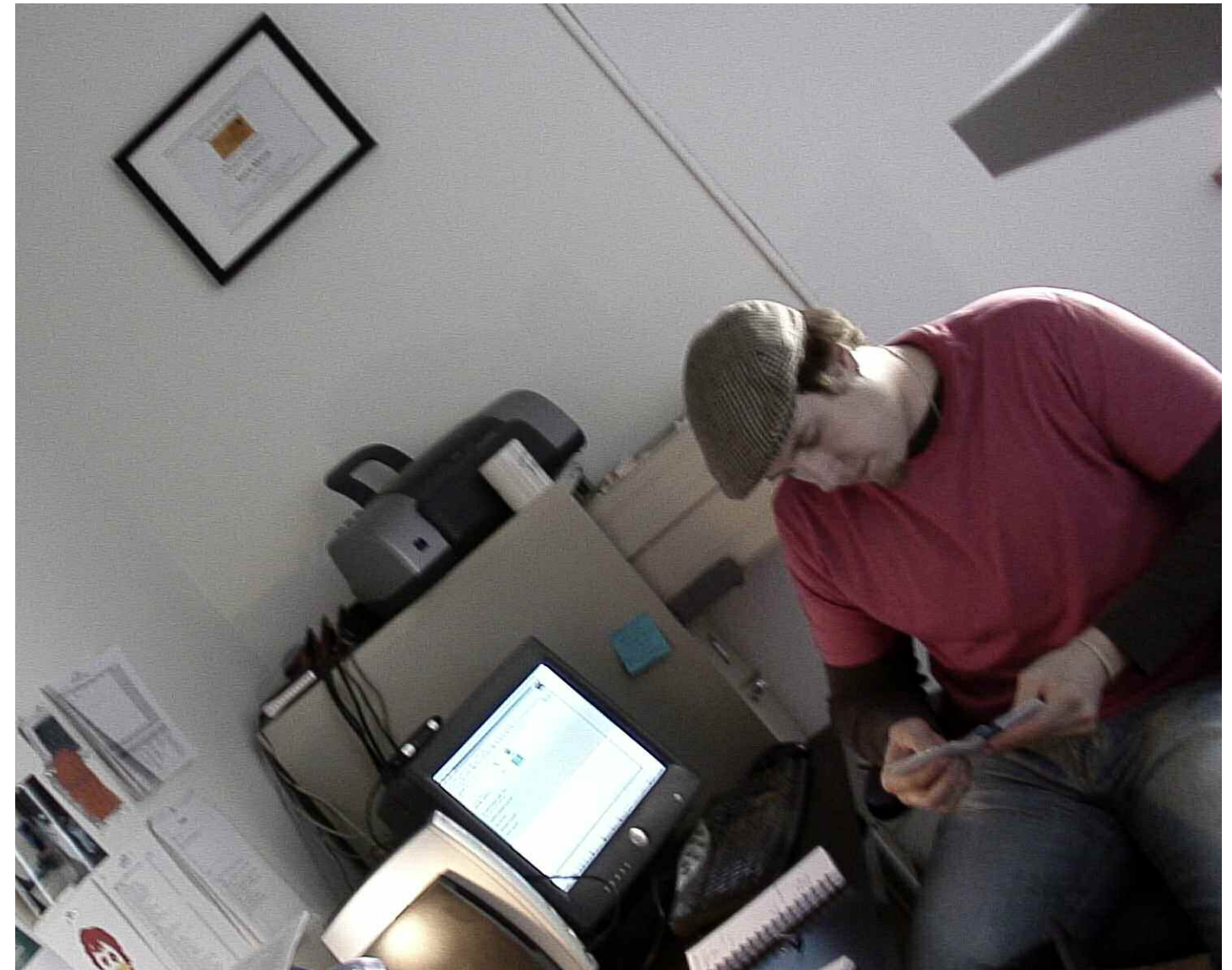
This whole new world opened up when I started working in a mentoring program at Brown. I started thinking about issues of social justice, how the school system works and how it can be improved. For the first two years out of college, I became a college adviser at a small high school in the Bronx. I came back to Providence still wanting to do college advising, but I knew I didn't want to be a guidance counselor at a regular high school. I came back with a naive notion to start a program to do college advising outside of school.

I didn't really have any idea what that meant and I had never worked in the nonprofit realm.

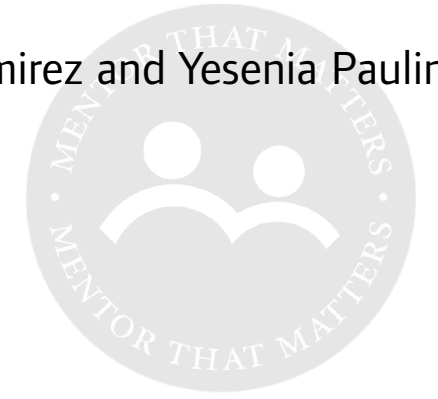
Right now, almost all my work with teenagers focuses on getting students into college. One of the things that I appreciate about the work: It clearly shows when we are successful. The fact that you got accepted to three respected art schools is our success.

I hope that everyone in College Visions doesn't forget about Providence. A lot of people growing up here are thinking, "As soon as I have the means, I'm out of Providence." I'm hoping that you guys get to explore the world, but I'm hoping some of you will come back and realize that Providence can be a cool place. I want talented people to stick around Providence.

I cannot imagine having a better job, but I don't imagine myself doing what I am doing for my whole life. I imagine myself having many more lives. I would love being a chef, working in the restaurant industry. Every time I see your artwork, I am inspired to do my own art, to just have more time in my personal life and to embrace the New Urban Arts idea of having a creative practice for life.



My coach wouldn't hesitate to get on you if you didn't do what you were supposed to do. But at the same time, he was constantly boosting my confidence.



Go Chase Your Dreams

I was really shy and quiet in high school; I didn't talk at all. But one of my friends took me to the Carriage House to do break dancing. I was sixteen when I started break dancing. I was eighteen when I started at the Everett Dance Theater. The artistic director saw me dancing and said, "Hey, you know how to dance! Do you want to do a show?" I kept doing it as a hobby, and then it became more like a career, an artistic talent. I love what I do right now: teaching, dancing, theater, performing and acting. I really don't see myself doing anything else.

My family hated this! My parents wanted me to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a businessman. Everyone in my Asian family was all about work, work, and work, make money and make money. That may be because it is part of our culture in general, but I see a lot of kids who are taking classes using their talents, learning things in the arts, going out there and using it. Now my family brags at times to friends about my dancing, being on stage, touring, and newspaper articles. But they still get upset that I didn't go to college, that I don't make a lot of money. They still wish I could get another job.

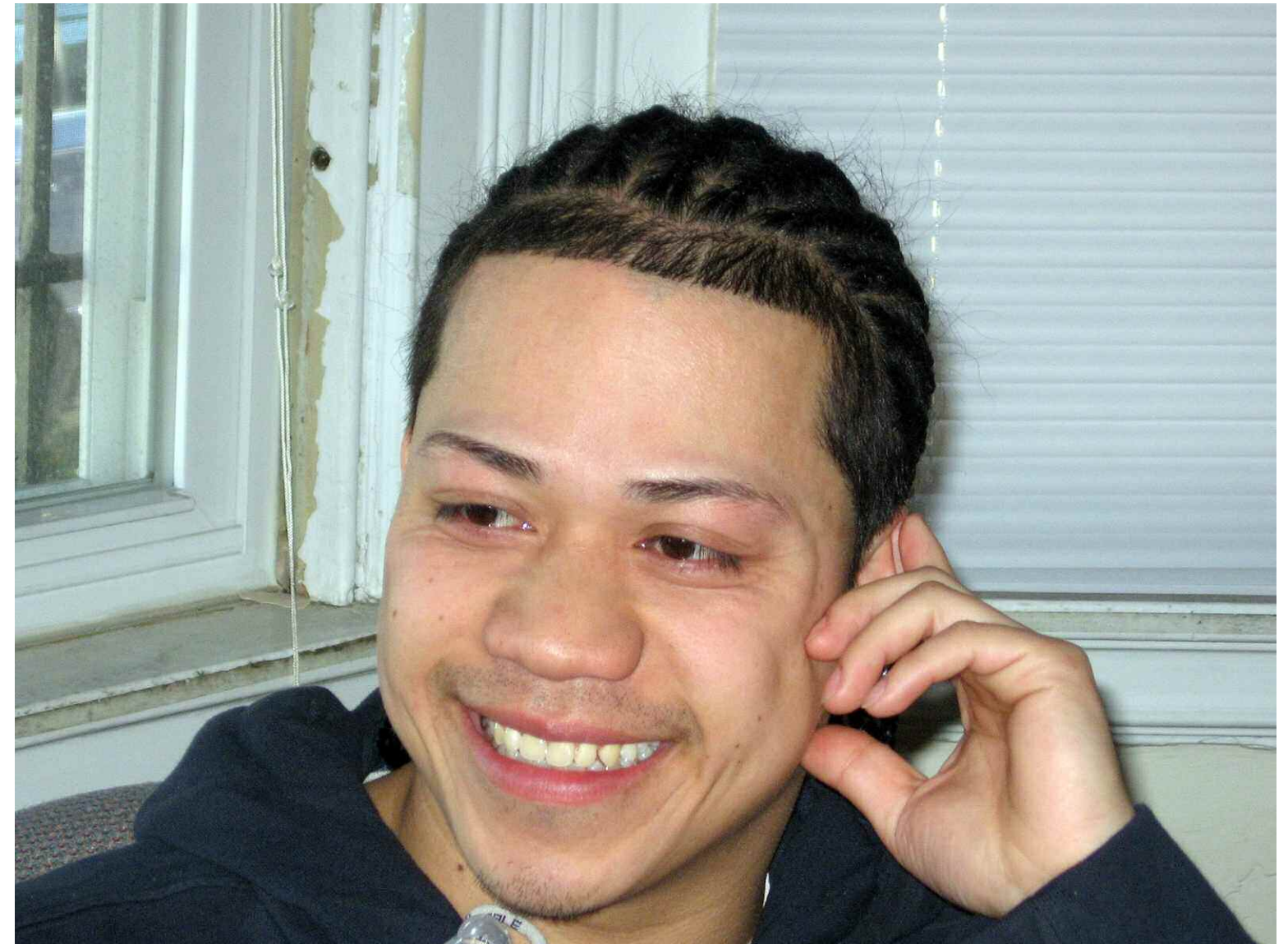
Mentoring is easier for me, because I am a lot younger than many of the teachers. I do not have to have a personal relationship with students, but a more laid back, easier relationship. Students don't have to put on this fake face. They can just talk to me more easily, the same way they talk to their friends, and I can

talk to them the same way. But I really need to be disciplined and prepared, to make sure the students are learning.

Not everyone learns at the same time or in the same way, and learning to deal with kids was a steppingstone in my life. The best time of being a mentor is seeing your kids perform. Whether they are graduating or they're on stage doing their thing, the crowds react, and you say to yourself, I did this! We worked together!

I learn a lot from young people, doing this kind of work. I've learned that the best thing is to love what you are working towards and to get paid for it. Don't do what you hate! Get your education, go chase your dreams, and go after what you love.

I cannot imagine having a better job, but I don't imagine myself doing what I am doing for my whole life. I imagine myself having many more lives. I would love being a chef, working in the restaurant industry. Every time I see your artwork, I am inspired to do my own art, to just have more time in my personal life and to embrace the New Urban Arts idea of having a creative practice for life.



The best part of being a mentor is seeing your kids perform. You say to yourself, I did this! We worked together!



Cooking Teaches You to Think Ahead



Conducting business the proper way means being a good person, not trying to get over on people. You treat them with respect.

I hated school. I did pretty good in it, I just didn't like it. It didn't keep my interest. I was kind of like the ringleader. But I was good at cooking. Some people have a gift, that's my gift.

I was poor when I was a kid. I started working when I was thirteen, washing dishes and scrubbing floors and washing out pots and pans. You work at that job for a couple years, then you get a promotion to flipping hamburgers and cooking French fries. After that I just picked it up, and I started working at my uncle's and father's restaurant, too. I got a lot of training there. I learned the hard way and became successful by working extra hard.

I ended up working right away after high school, for different operations, like Pawtucket Country Club. When I was eighteen, I moved to New Hampshire, right near the mountains. I worked for the Marriott for thirteen years in the food and beverage department, opening up hotels throughout the country. My uncle and father taught me how to save money, and to invest the money I earned. Now I have two restaurants [Meritage in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, and Chardonay's in Seekonk, Massachusetts].

Managing restaurants is very difficult, 'cause you're working with people every day of the week. Conducting business the proper way means being a good person, not trying to get over on people. If some-

one works for you, you pay them. And you treat them with respect.

Cooking teaches you how to plan out things, to think ahead. You have an idea and place it into play, and create a great dish that people would like. You have to know math to extend recipes. You also have to research the products that you're going to buy for certain dishes—you have to be able to get the product, and it has to be cost effective. And you have to know how to prepare the raw product. You have to have great taste buds, so the dish is good. Then you have to teach the dish to the cooks that work for you, and check the dish periodically, so it remains as good as you created it. When you cook you have to please people—it's a lot easier in life if you are in harmony. So you also have to compromise when cooking.

You get to a point in life when it's not about the money, it's about giving back to the community. If I can help someone that is young and trying to improve themselves, maybe I can make a difference in someone's life. I would be happy if someone said, "I remember going to Steve's restaurant, and I'm a chef now because of him."



Servicing Young People Is Not Enough

I really feel bad for young people who are young today in America, the richest country in the world. We rob you of your childhood. The job of society is to protect you, shelter you a bit, to show you the beauty of this world—art, theater, music. Instead, young people have to think about not being shot and beaten. You should not be growing the way that you are, seeing the things that you see. You know more people who died than I do, who grew up as a soldier in Israel. You lose your friends to homicides and gangs. It is shocking.

One of the lessons for me from the Holocaust is that we cannot be bystanders. Many people helped me in life. I just want it to be better for the next generation, which is you. You are going to do it for my two-year-old son when you are my age and he is your age. It is a very simple kind of contract.

At home, I caused lots of trouble and heartache. I slapped a Bible teacher in elementary school. I was a wild kid. Here, I would've been arrested. I was a regular kid. I was temperamental. My mother was a Serb and my dad was a Croatian. I was in the Middle East. We were hot-tempered and we ended up okay.

Slowly, slowly, I started teaching photography, started advocating for youth in court. Then, my best friend, who was a drug dealer, said, "Teny, it is too late for me. But save the young kids." He died the next day, and I felt I would be a wimp if I left. It was hard, because I am not naturally chummy. I am a thinker. I

would rather be alone looking at beautiful art. Instead, I spend twenty hours a day dealing with people, with the mayor, the chief of police, with schools. I am in a very different life than I thought I would be.

We teach nonviolence and conflict resolution, because we realize that servicing young people is not enough. We have thirteen people in the Street Workers program. All of the street workers were arrested before. They were in gangs, in with drugs, shootings, or different issues. But they have changed their lives and they are the best ones to help the community to change, rather than outsiders like social workers.

We have a culture now that forces young people into violence, whether it is TV, music, or video games. We really want to work with how young people relate to each other, how adults treat them, how parents treat each other, how society relates to each other.

Young people in this city know me personally, and I think there is mutual respect. They see that I genuinely care about them, and that breaks a lot of barriers. They know that my goals for them are not because they are minority, but the same goals that I want for my kids. My cell phone is on 24 hours a day. This is difficult. But that is what we owe to our young people: to be there.



We cannot be bystanders. Many people helped me in life. I just want it to be better for the next generation. It is a very simple kind of contract.



When you are privileged and powerful, you look at the smaller groups differently.

Get Them Out While They Can

I'm an Israeli. I grew up in Israel; my mother was a Christian and my father was a Jew. I served in the Israeli army, and being a soldier made me think a lot about violence. I thought about the Holocaust, how the civilizations that developed in Europe could turn and kill minorities. That really bothered me—why minorities are the victims.

I lived in England for two years and I saw how the Irish were treated. Then I moved to Boston and saw how the blacks were treated. That made me think why it is that when you are privileged and powerful, you look at the smaller groups differently.

I was an art student, I studied photography while in Boston. Around that time, there was a famous case: a white man murdered his pregnant wife and accused a black male. That really created a crisis: a manhunt, and tension between the black and white communities. Come to find out, it was the husband that killed his wife.

I got very involved working in the community, interrupting violence in the streets. I worked as a photographer for this black minister. After a while, I befriended a very well respected drug dealer. He stated, "I am in these streets 24/7, so I will get to these kids and they will listen to me." I was the last person that saw him alive. Before he died, he told me: "Save the kids. Get them out while they can.."

From there on, I knew what I had to do. I moved to Providence with my wife and kid, and was recruited by Saint Michael's Church to run nonviolence workshops. We then expanded and started taking on more roles—street interruptions, like what I had done in Boston.

We now have a staff of twenty street workers and we are dedicated to the teens in the community. We attend schools, recreation centers, parks—anywhere violence is, we are there to stop it. We do all we can do to keep our streets peaceful. We put ourselves in danger for the teens that are our future.



What Comes from the Heart Reaches the Heart

I can't imagine being eighteen right now. I was church born and bred. I didn't have too many obstacles, or too much stress that teenagers do now. It wasn't like I escaped from it; marijuana was still strong, alcohol was still strong. I tried some of it, but there's nothing I liked. Did that, done that, been there, let it go.

I grew up being a Sunday school teacher and I've always been in contact with youth through church. Young people respond to me as different from most people. I raised twelve children, and all twelve are different from each other. You have to deal with everybody differently. My children are grown now and they are not in trouble with the law, no drugs. Only two had children out of wedlock, and that's because their mother, my sister, passed away, and in order to deal with that, they chose to have a baby. That's something I couldn't stop. We deal with it now. They take care of the children and everything's okay.

I founded an organization for woman who are abused by Christian leaders. The abuse starts when they're young and it grows as they get older. So now I'm about to start a mentor program for ages 8 to 12 and 13 to 18. If I can get to these young people at an early age, maybe they won't grow into abused adults.

Mentoring wasn't a word back then to us. It's basically what we have been doing all along: talking to the young women, talking to the young men, telling them to keep themselves for marriage. You learn a lot

when you listen, even if it's just the minor things that the person is telling you: how they feel neglected or mistreated, or they feel like they're not loved. You can learn a lot just by watching a person's actions, listening to their conversations. You learn from them and then pass it on to someone else.

I've seen it all. There isn't one thing a young person can do or say that will surprise me. At this age and time, they'll do and say anything. This is a new breed of generation and they need a lot more understanding and love than the generation I grew up in. Most of the young ladies have very low self-esteem, and most of the young men are very violent. There are a lot of young girls that are very violent; all they want to do is fight, and I don't clearly understand why.

It's satisfying to know that someone is listening to me. I can tell, because their behavior patterns change. For example, it makes me feel good to see you walk around with a smile on your face. I always saw you with a frown on your face, and it's really nice to see you smile.

I was put here to teach, to empower, and to uplift, and that's what I intend from this day to the day I die—to bring joy to, and to encourage, as many people as I possibly can. A lot of teens I come across are on the wrong path. And I just give love, because what comes from the heart reaches the heart.





In the Middle of Everything

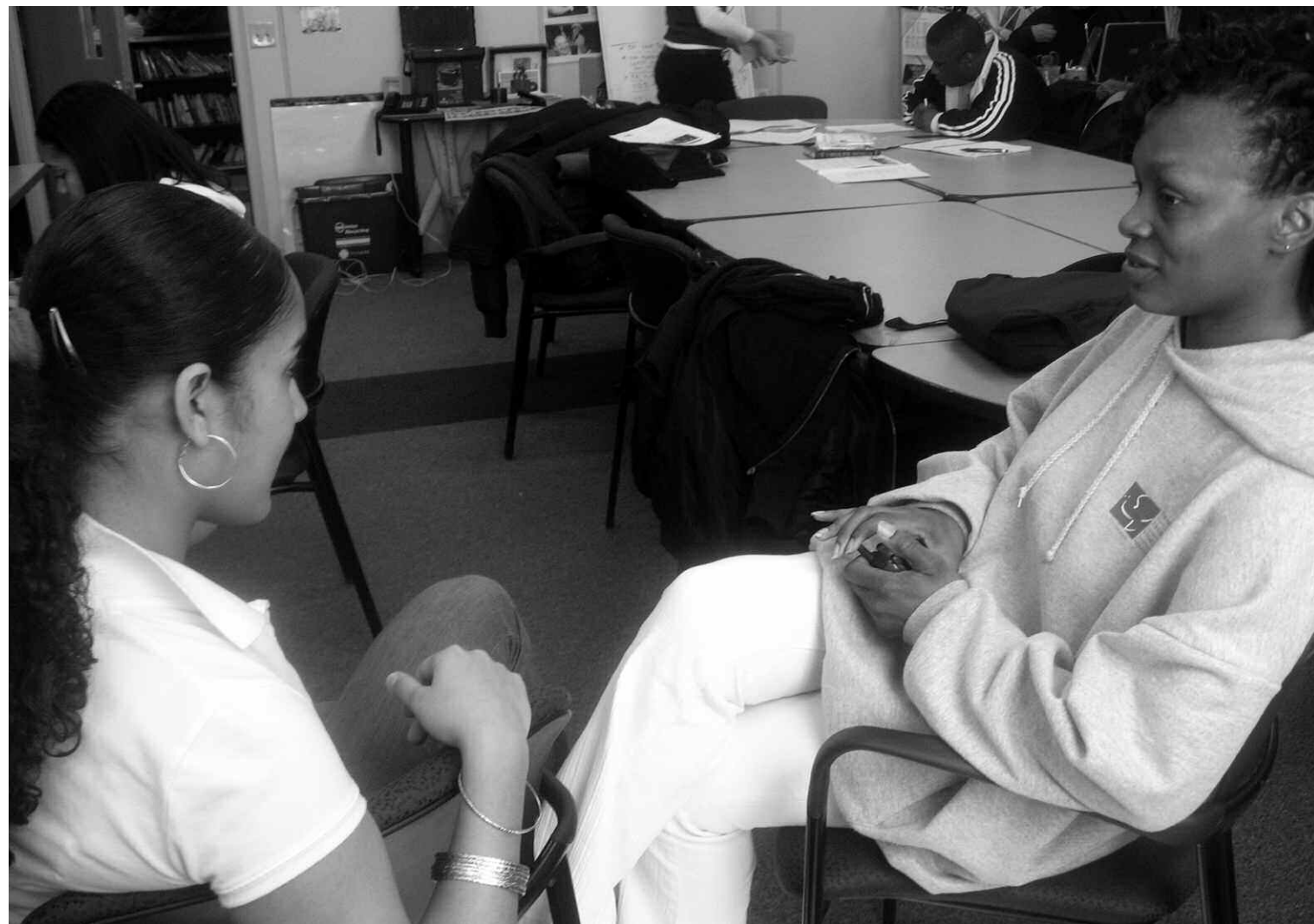
My childhood was a'ight, until I turned like ten. Then . . . it was abusive. I didn't look up to nobody. I was just tryin' to get out the situation I was in, dealing with my mom.

I was a hairdresser before. I became a street worker because my son passed away. I had a lot of kids come up to me, talk to me, ask me things. I knew sorta what street working is, and I wanted to see if I could help kids with some kinda problem.

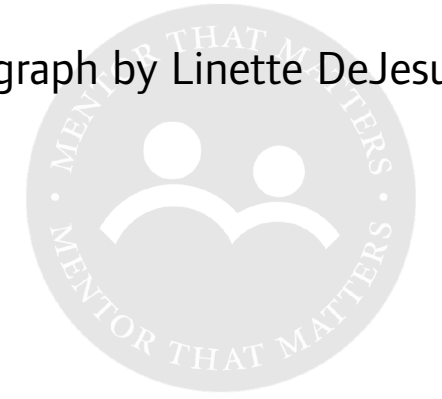
I lost my temper once. I let someone take me out my element. When I was at work there was a big brawl. It was right there and I was in the middle of everything. I could have did better not to lose my temper.

I have two mentees from the Met school. I got a couple of girls to go back home, and a couple to go back to school, to actually figure out how to deal with problems.

I really like some people, but I don't look up to them. I'm busy being me.



I became a street worker because my son passed away. I had a lot of kids come up to me, talk to me, ask me things.



Pushing in a New Direction

A student came in here recently whom I hadn't seen in five or six years. The last time I saw him, he was actually very upset at New Urban Arts, because he was in a local gang, and a fight was happening one day after school. He came in here and asked his artist mentor to drive him to the fight, which is obviously not something we would do.

He had been writing poetry here for two years with that mentor, so it's understandable at some level. He had spent some time building that mentoring relationship, which he thought that he would do anything for him, including driving to a fight. When we said no, he felt let down.

Five or six years later, when he came back, he thanked us. He talked about New Urban Arts being a safe place for him when the streets were really hot. He talked about this being a place where he really learned that his life is worth living. He ended up getting out of that life, and he actually spends a lot of his time trying to help younger kids get out of street gangs now. He attributes a lot of that to his experiences in this studio. So he is actually an inspiration to me.

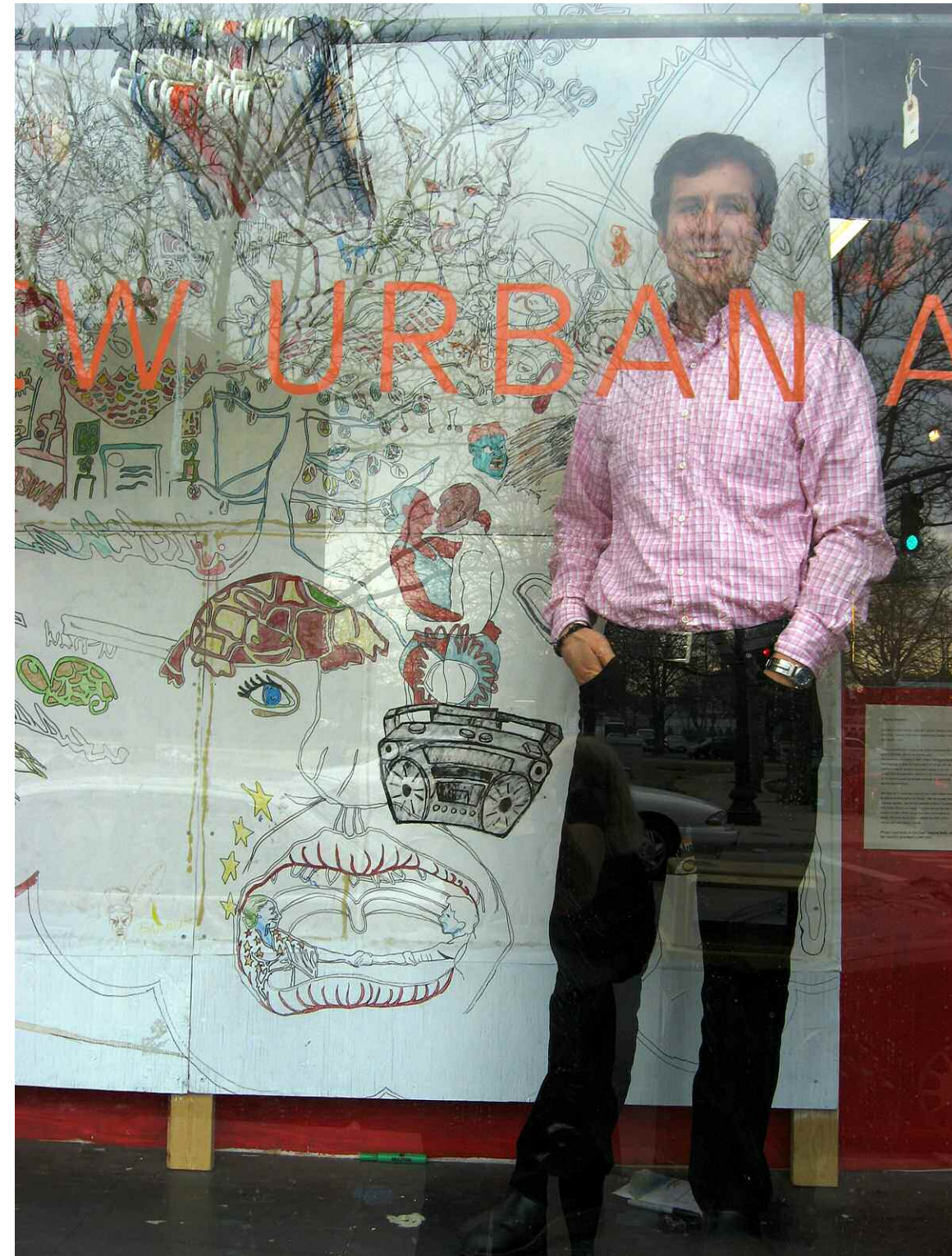
New Urban Arts is an art studio for public high school kids in Providence. We have artists in the community who mentor students in a variety of art forms. The artists are typically young, just out of college, and in the last ten years about 950 high school students have come through here. My job is to support the organization so those things can happen.

I am incredibly lucky to have known so many students in Providence. I consider them artists who inspire me, students who challenge teachers and teach me, mentors to my own children. On a daily basis I am playing a supportive role as well as a curious one. I take an interest in what kids care about, what they are thinking, what challenges might be facing them, and what their aspirations might be.

I have this contradiction: I fear failing; and I recognize that if I'm not afraid of doing what I'm about to do, then I'm probably not pushing myself in a new direction. Those two things together simultaneously create the impulse to just plow forward.

Being creative, being an independent thinker, having your own thoughts, being critical about the world is really important. At the same time, I also think it's really difficult. We live in a world that is pretty ruthless, that tells people what kind of clothes they should wear and how they should act, what they should do, and the work they need to be successful. I believe any high school student should carve their own path, whatever that may be.

There are those moments where you really connect. You see the young person do something that is totally amazing, or it's partly inspired by the work that you do. Those are moments you carry around with you forever. They always feel real; sometimes they even grow in significance. And those are the things that matter to me, in terms of feeling like this is a good, meaningful life.



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You Do Not Know What You Are Talking About

Growing up in New York, I lived in a very dangerous area. I loved extracurricular activities. They gave me an outlet to escape the violence and the dysfunctional behavior around me. I was fortunate to have good mentors. They had experience, stuff I could not get in the normal day of school. They took the time to give me life and love and share their interests.

In junior high school, I remember a summer program where all the best artists, musicians and actors come. An artist, Gregory Phillips, was doing abstract art, and I did not understand or appreciate it. One day I told him he was not doing anything. And he put me in my place. He told me that, even if you do not like abstract art, you need to be respectful and learn from it. He said, "You really do not know what you are talking about, young man."

He hurt my feelings, but I understood years later that that was the greatest lesson. I graduated from RISD and art was my first love. I looked at books and met famous people, and they gave me dreams to do something positive with my life. This is why I began teaching chess. I am not married and I have no family. Extraordinary circumstances put me into this situation. I could easily get into a higher paying job, but I do this program for personal satisfaction.

I use chess as a vehicle to teach kids another approach to life. The main thing I learn is commitment,

indefatigable effort. To be able to take something and follow it to the end. To be able to push yourself to places that you do not think you can find. I am able to push kids beyond their expectations. Whether it be chess, basketball, or creative writing, there is a creative process that kids can become attuned to. And if they can connect with it, they will be successful in what they do.

Most of the time I deal with kids with dysfunctional background. I have developed greater patience. There were a couple of kids who tried my patience and I could have kicked them out. Your ego and pride is involved, but I had to see the greater good. I had to dig deeper, find compassion in my heart, and keep them.

I have been working with teenagers for ten years. I teach in twelve sites; there have been hundreds and hundreds of kids who have gone through my chess program. I see them on the streets and around the city. Some have gone to college. My students come back and tell me how they are doing and how they miss the program. Given a dream and an inspiration, they begin to aspire. And once they find success in one area, they transfer this success to other areas. It happens all the time.



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