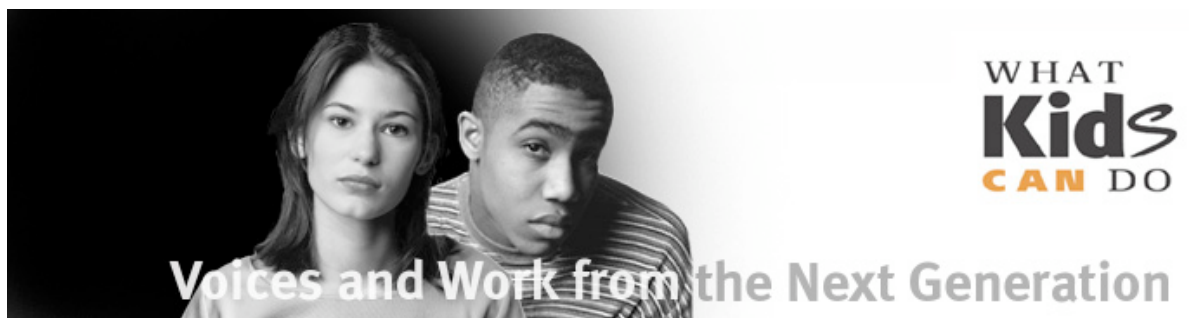
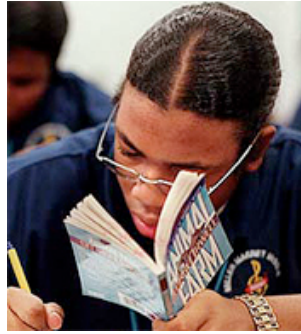


Tough Talk about Student Responsibility:
Growing Student Leaders in Oakland, California

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Tough Talk about Student Responsibility

"...I hope my students will try and change the system, but it's their decision. We're an empowerment program—not a fraternity or some type of special club where you have to be popular to be in it. We're about trying to give students the proper information, enough of a theoretical foundation where they can grow to be better decision makers. Then, if they decide they want to make change, they'll be better prepared on how to do it, and most importantly, they'll have the courage that oppression tries to strip from people, they'll have the courage to go out and give it a shot." — **Darrick Smith, TryUMF program at Oakland Tech High School, Oakland, California**

In Oakland, California, students, teachers, district administrators, and community organizations aim to walk the talk when it comes to supporting students as activists in their schools. Forty students from across the district gather regularly in an All-City Council intended to gain student input in district-wide decisions. Three of the city's high schools now feature elective leadership classes open to all students. A number of community-based youth development and organizing groups have joined forces with students and teachers to create an agenda for change, and the school district recently created a position for a youth leadership coordinator.

WKCD's Students as Allies program, sponsored by MetLife Foundation, has had the chance to work with an extraordinary teacher and group of students at Oakland Tech High School who are part of this campaign to raise nontraditional student leaders, in a community where poverty and violence have a hard grip.

Their words speak powerfully to the realities of what it takes for students to become, in the words of the youth leadership coordinator, "citizens, not just tourists" in their schools.

Three years ago, Darrick Smith, a graduate of Oakland Tech High School and the University of California at Santa Cruz, returned to his high school alma mater determined to help students fight the low expectations that keep them down. He began a program called TryUMF (for Try and Uplift My Folks), a leadership class any student can take—and re-take—on a semester basis. Smith makes fierce academic and social demands on students, but they pay off. Of the 30 TryUMF "graduates" in 2004, all but two headed to college (including Northwestern, Spelman, University of Minnesota) in a high school where college is not the norm. They held top leadership positions—from All-City Council President to conflict resolution managers—and gave hours of volunteer service in their school and community.

Here we present excerpts from Darrick Smith's May 2004 speech to 40 student leaders from six Oakland, California high schools at an All-City Council meeting, an advisory group to the school district, along with excerpts from an interview with Smith about his work at Oakland Tech.

Smith on what it means to be a student leader and take responsibility (Excerpts from his speech to Oakland's All-City Council)

Use this opportunity to do something you actually want to do, as opposed to doing something that somebody else has done. Some of you might be in here to help your college applications, some of you guys might be in here because it's a good way of getting out of school for a couple of periods. And that's fine—I have my own views on why missing school isn't the worst thing all the time. But I will say this: Use this opportunity to challenge the school district a little bit, to do things that are a little bit unconventional. Use it to challenge yourself. Use it *well*.

Because there's cats that don't come to these meetings who have great ideas but they're too scared to come and they're not plugged into the system. Then there's cats that come to these meetings because their teachers think they're leaders because they get good grades and keep their mouths shut. Well, that's not leadership either. Getting good grades, keeping your mouth shut, that's not good leadership.

Leadership is knowing when to speak and what to say. See, you can speak and have nothing to say. Youth voice—what good is youth voice if you don't have something important to say? "We want youth voice!" "Well all right, what do you want?" "I don't know, man! Oh—you all need to get us cleaner bathrooms!" You all can't clean your own bathrooms? Oh, no! Well, there you go. "We need tutors!" Those who have 2,000 kids that go to your school, can't you all tutor each other? Oh, no, man! All right, so then you start to see that there's a gap, there's a big gap in this leadership issue. It involves understanding what leadership really means and what it really takes. Cleaner bathrooms. Tutors. You can do better than that.

... When you're thinking of why you come here, don't think of why adults come to meetings ("Oh I had a meeting with this person." "Oh, you must have got some things done!" "Yeah, I had a meeting!") In the place you come from, you can't afford to have meetings for the sake of having meetings. You've got to get down to business, plain and simple. And the first thing on your agenda should be the stuff that you all face in school daily. You've got to understand this. Good-meaning folks may come to these All-City Council meetings and tell you how to get engaged in civic action. How to be youth leaders. Conferences, workshops, public speaking skills, etc. Those things are important, okay. But your civic action has got to start on your own campus, with the cats around you who threaten your future every day.

Take trespassers. You all got trespassers who didn't graduate from your school, but they come on campus to cause trouble. They can't stay away—even though when they were going to your school, they didn't want to go there. They prey upon you all, and they prey upon each other. Cats get jumped, girls ain't safe, boys ain't safe, teachers ain't safe. I mean, it's crazy. You got to be the student body to get on that.

You want better teachers, you say? If you want better teachers, students have got to quit running the good ones away. 'Cause you got good teachers. But how do you think they feel coming to school only to have some kid cuss them out, threaten them, go through their purse? You got to be the student body to get on that.



Cats come to school drunk and high, you gotta do something about it. You can't have cats acting like it's a party. This is a school, man. Sexual harassment, don't be all up on girls and then come here and talk about it!

Whether you like it or not, it's on you. Either you can *not* take responsibility, and let things go the way they are, and keep complaining—or you can do something about it and try and improve things. But what you don't want to do is have your title, *Student Leader*, just be an empty title.

... There's a quote from *Braveheart*: "Men don't follow titles, they follow courage."

And the one thing you don't see a lot of in Oakland is courage. I never met so many weak knees in my life. It is so sad 'cause they certainly try to dress the part. But a thug ain't nothing but a slave with a weapon. When you're a thug nobody else [at school] is scared of you, really, the only people scared of you are the people in the community. You're only preying on your own folks. That's not real power. Real power is saying no to this intimidation.

So there it is. Cats are walking around our schools scared—scared to read, scared to do math, scared to go to class, scared to be good, scared to have courage, scared to shake somebody's hand, scared to smile, scared to get off the drugs, scared to stop dealing drugs, scared to find out that they're really somebody different, scared to find out that their mama was wrong about them when she said they wasn't worth nothing, scared to realize they're turning into their daddy already and they don't want to.

It's time to put an end to the fear. It's time to stand up straight, to *stand up*. It's time to say, "Look, I'm tired of this," and boom, get it together. You all represent, what, 14,000 high schoolers? Do something with it please, all right? Good.

Smith on the TryUMF program at Oakland Tech and his hope for his students

There are six original principles behind TryUMF. The first one is representation, the second is voice in action, the third is understanding stereotypes, the fourth is clarity. The fifth one is called GIT vision (Goals in Sight and Thought) and requires some explanation. GIT is about the different forms of a person's vision—their goals, their ability to see certain things (especially seeing beneath the surface), their analytical ability and insight, their ability to put together in their minds an understanding of people's thought patterns so that they can anticipate their movements.

GIT vision is especially important when it comes to preventing things, preventing violence with what we call the power of influence. When [TryUMF] students have friends that commit violent acts or things that can lead to any type of negative effect on their lives, when they have friends that do these things, when they understand their friends' thought patterns, they can actually help prevent their friends from being involved in violent activities because they can intervene before it gets to such an intense level.

The sixth principle is fuel. Fuel is about a person's ability to convert rage back into raw energy that can then be channeled into positive things—and become fuel. When you're asking students to use these other five principles and, say, go all the way up to where they're representing their family, and they're representing their city and their ethnicity and their gender and all these different parts of their identity, the only way they're going to have the energy to do all this is if they pull from deep inside themselves. Since most of our students experience some form of rage or hostility or anger at whatever situation they're in on any given day, we try and teach them why and how they should channel that energy into things more positive.

... I don't believe we've created a program that makes students into something that they're not already. Rather, we try to restore students, like restoring an old '66 Mustang that was tight when it came off the lot but then became rubble with all it went through. We try to restore it and shine it back up and then maintain it. So we don't create great students. Students are great when they come to us. We just try to keep them that way through the often-destructive process that is high school.

... I hope my students will try and change the system, but it's their decision. We're an empowerment program—not a fraternity or some type of special club where you have to be popular to be in it. We're about trying to give students the proper information, enough of a theoretical foundation where they can grow to be better decision makers. Then, if they decide they want to make change, they'll be better prepared on how to do it, and most importantly, they'll have the courage that oppression tries to strip from people, they'll have the courage to go out and give it a shot.

So yes, I would want them to make change if they saw it necessary. But if they just want to go out and get a job and be the first person in their family to graduate from college and raise a good family and not abuse their children or abuse their wives or husbands or partners, then that's pretty damn good!

Recently, WKCD had the chance to sit down and talk with a group of students in the TryUMF program at Oakland Tech. They spoke about what makes the program special, what they've learned, and their determination to change—or at least, defy—the low expectations of teachers, classmates, and the “system.” Here we share some of their comments. Participants included: Jermaine Alexander, Marvin Balan, DeAndre Benjamin, Nicole Borst, Luke Brekke-Miesner, Latisha Brown, JaQuan Bryant, Mikaela Franceschi, Robert Gainer III, Rayna E. Garcia, Melissa Massey, Seyha Men, Traci Newman, Leticia Rubalcava, and Audra Tipton.

On what sets TryUMF apart

Luke: Number one you have the workload, we do a lot, we work with sociology, oppression, masculinity, feminism...I'm talking about reading, I'm talking about videos, I'm talking about discussions, all of that. We do a lot of essays. It's college level work. But we also do a lot of character development, because I think what you'll find in Oakland is a city that has bad representation, not bad people but people who don't know how to represent themselves, just walking around and doing whatever and acting ignorant. If you're in the Oakland public schools, particularly if you're a minority, people have a certain view of us, they think right off the bat that we're hella dumb. So you need to represent yourself well to buck those stereotypes, listening, watching how you speak and who you're speaking to, knowing who you are and what you want. Representation, voice and action, those are principles that are key.



David: TryUMF opens your eyes to things that you do every day and don't really see, and then it lets you know that you have a choice, you know. I think that everything going on in the school starts with the students. After the principal sets the rules, then it's up to the students to follow the rules because the purpose of coming to school is to try to get an

education, and hopefully go to college and get a further education. Students need to feel that coming to school is for their betterment, not for their imprisonment. TryUMF makes that point.

Will: When I first came into this TryUMF class, I didn't know about oppression and dehumanization, I didn't know that if you dehumanize somebody, make somebody feel like they're less human, you're actually being less human in yourself. Learning that, it made me less likely to want to do anything hurtful to anybody else. I know I want to feel like I'm more human, and so why not give that to other people? This leadership program shows you that everything you do has a consequence, it shows you the things behind your eyes that you don't see.



Ambrose: One of our first assignments in TryUMF class, we had to go around the school using different words to express ourselves, uplifting words to talk to people in different ways and just see how they reacted to it. Like instead of saying the "b" word, you call somebody beautiful, you use all uplifting words instead of words that put people down. The strange thing is a lot of people reacted like you were weird, they didn't accept it 'cause it's something they're just not used to hearing. You can see how badly oppressed people are when they get a compliment and just don't accept it. These are the kinds of important things TryUMF opens your eyes to.

On challenging low expectations

Danesia: I didn't used to come to class, my GPA was like a 0.32 when I first came to Tech, and as many arguments as me and Darrick's had in this exact room as we're sitting in now, him cussing and yelling and we going back and forth, I finally did it, finally got my grades up. I represent myself now by trying to go to college, bringing my GPA up, going to summer school, making up the credits.

One of the things I've learned is how to step up. I mean, if you see your friends doing some stupid stuff that you yourself used to do, you gotta be an example for them and say, Come on let's go to class, stop cutting, stop doing this, stop doing that! If they still don't want to go to class, you be sure to go to class yourself, to move yourself forward.

Veronica: Danesia said it, you can't force anybody to do what they don't want to do, to step up. But for myself, I don't want to just sit back and let things happen. I want to be a part of it, 'cause I want to change the future for not only myself, but my family. I don't want my niece and my nephew to struggle. UC Berkeley had only 50 applicants from Oakland schools, they accepted 17, and only three out of Oakland Tech, I read that on the Internet. Why?



David: One of the things you hear a lot around here, from some of the teachers, is that college isn't for you. In the school I went to before, I never heard that, but coming to Tech, I see it in the amount of the work, the workload, with teachers not preparing students as well as they should.

Danesia: That's right. Oakland public schools don't expect you to go to college, because you're not supposed to go to college. You were meant *not* to go to college. You were meant to walk out of school, you were meant to go to the donut shop, you were meant to struggle. We have a donut shop across the street and a lot of people cut to go to the donut shop. You were *meant* to do those things. At every school, they claim that they don't want you to cut, but at every school you will find an open door. A student cannot do anything about that. The only thing a student can do is choose the right course to take, and stay in class, and get their education.

On making change at the district level

Danesia: Go to the district and make a change, you say. It's possible in Oakland, but it's the whole fact that youth gotta be prepared to take the responsibility of making that change. It's not easy to make a change. You gotta stick to it. And oftentimes, as youth, we feel that we can't do it, so we just give up.



...Facts, you need facts. You need information. You need to be educated on what [the administration is] doing wrong, because you can't just go up to somebody and not know what you're talking about. You need to be educated on what they say they're doing and what students say they're doing. You gotta keep going to meetings and not let anybody run over you. You gotta be willing to study the information, you gotta be willing to survey, you gotta be willing to ask people about it. You gotta understand.

On making change at Oakland Tech

Luke: What TryUMF offers is how students can change the vibe of a school and how it operates. A lot of times students are scared to stand out and do something different or positive because there is a lot of antagonizing. In Oakland schools there is a lot of ignorant people who don't want to see anything positive—students that are satisfied with the status quo and come to school to kick it and not really to learn—and when certain individuals try to do something positive to change that, they get shot down by their fellow students. TryUMF provides a forum for us to speak what we want to and not be shot down by each other. We're sort of a family, we're a whole program.

Every morning we do "formation" in front of the school. We say the TryUMF Anthem, it's kind of an uplifting poem that Darrick wrote. And we all stand in formation and look straight ahead and say it really loud, and everyone that goes by hears us. And having that presence, you know, we'll get chided a little bit, but people respect that because we're together, and it's not just one student saying something.

TryUMF Anthem

In the midst of dropping GPAs and disrespectful displays, of ignorant melees, signaling the waste of each day, comes a light out of the sky that is I. Brighter than the sun, yet missed by the eye. For this light is not for sight, cause I shine way too bright. Chocolate smiles erupt with my own, and haters hate how much I've grown, cause they know my light represents my home, focus, intense heat and flames, this must be the sign, it's TryUMF time, shine baby shine.

On involving more students in TryUMF

Ambrose: I think it would be a good if we could get more people in a leadership program like this. The problem, though, is that a lot of kids aren't ready to accept the program. They don't come to school to learn, they just come to mess stuff up and play around. So the first thing to do is to start with a group of students that are willing to accept the program, and from that expand—students talk to other students, kind of recruit them. Eventually the TryUMF program will get bigger and our school will be stronger because of the program. But it's not a thing where you can just throw a whole bunch of students in and expect that they'll all accept it and the school will be better within the next two or three years. I think it's a process that will take maybe ten, fifteen years.



Luke: That's a tough issue, what you do with the kids that cause a lot of disruptions. It sounds great, but you just can't save everybody. When you try to save a few people at the expense of everyone, that's when you'll run into trouble, because there's certain individuals who will always cause this vibe of negativity that will poison a lot of the other kids who are open. Like if you made everyone take a leadership class, it's a good idea because there's a lot of skills people should learn. But not everyone is meant to be a leader. There's people at the school that I would not want to follow, no matter what they learned. Yeah, it's difficult. You don't want to just throw kids out, you don't want to say, You're not good enough so therefore you don't have the chance to have the same education as everyone else. But you can't have those few poison everyone else.

I think there's a difference between writing off an entire minority group or a whole city, and writing off certain individuals. We're not saying that you don't give everyone a chance—you definitely give everyone a chance, and you try to help everybody, but there comes a point where certain individuals just show that they're not going to help themselves or you, that they are taking away from what you're trying to teach other children. So we're not saying beforehand, Oh no you don't look like you'd be right for our program. But if despite the training they are still at a point mentally—and it's not necessarily their fault, it has a lot to do with where and how they were raised—where they just aren't cutting it and they're messing up other kids, that's the point where you write them off. And it's not saying, Yeah black people are just dumb so they're not going to do it. No, maybe a certain black person, maybe a certain white person, just personally, mentally, they're not ready for the work, or they can't handle it. It's at that point that you say they can't be in a certain program.