

I Transform into Greatness When I Became a Community Leader

My name is Andre T. Mitchell and I live in Brooklyn, New York. I grew up in Brownsville, Brooklyn for the early years of my life; and then in East New York, Brooklyn from middle school years to the present.

My childhood memories consist mostly of my family. I grew up in a large family with five brothers, two sisters, and my mother. My mother was a single parent and provided for us with government assistance; and she did the best she could. I also have fond memories of my community. I remember playing so many different games and sports with my friends in the neighborhood. Although I do remember my friendships, most of the times my siblings and I played together because there were a lot of us. I recall that we always made the best of our situation. Another memory that is very vivid in my mind, is visiting with my grandmother – my mother’s family – in Albany projects in Brownsville. It was very similar to where I lived as a child, because we grew up in public housing, as well.

I live with my family; and as mentioned, I have five brothers and two sisters. We are all very close. Although both of my parents are deceased, I had a much closer relationship with my mother. She was the true matriarch in my family. I never had a long-term relationship with my dad; because, he and my mother separated when I was very young. My mother has always been my rock, up until the day she passed and beyond. Even though my father was not a present force in my life, I do not have resentment towards him, nor do I have a great deal of respect and love for him. I understand the hardships he must have gone through – being a Black Man in America during that time.

Some of the hardships that I faced were in my early years: we were poor and I was exposed to drugs and violence early in my life. We lived in a poverty-stricken, drug infested, and violent neighborhood. We did not have many of the things that others were able to afford and it was only intensified because there were a lot of us. However, I realized at a young age that I really enjoyed school. I loved to learn new things. Liking school was certainly not a popular choice amongst some of the other children in my school. I was teased and ridiculed for my eagerness in class.

This was compacted by the fact that I became a father in high school. I was a teenage parent with responsibilities above and beyond just me. Although it was rough, it made me see very early, how important it was for me to be a good father and provider. One of the most difficult obstacles that I ever had to face was when I was incarcerated for a crime I did not commit. It was devastating.

My first experience of incarceration was when I was a teenager. I faced the charge of murder and was subsequently convicted of manslaughter, again, for a crime that I did not commit. I was scared out of my mind. I had never been through something like that before and not knowing what to expect increased my nervousness and fear. My only relationship with the experience was the “reality” of what I saw on television.

I had no money to hire an attorney, so there was no chance for me to present a strong case. I was young, and I realized that the system was more in line with convicting people like me rather than helping them. I witnessed firsthand, just how corrupt our justice system can be. I lost all confidence in the system when I was tried and wrongfully convicted. Prior to that experience, I thought that if a person was innocent of a crime, and they took it to trial, they would be found not guilty and released.

When my time was done, I was released from prison and back into the same community where those very conditions of poverty, violence, and drugs existed. The only difference was that now I was labeled a felon and an ex con. It was a test of tests. Nevertheless, I overcame all those obstacles because I had a strong will and desire to do so. I wanted to provide for my family and most importantly – prove society and everyone wrong. Yes, I was formerly incarcerated but that did not define me; I could take that and still persevere. I am a firm believer that you can come through any hardship and succeed in becoming a better person while having a positive impact on your family and community.

The prison system is only set up to incarcerate and there is an obvious target for young people of color in poor neighborhoods. This system was not created to rehabilitate. Young people are convicted and sent to county jails where residents from those communities prosper and benefit from their incarceration. It is a business that is fueled by human suffering and labor. I do not believe that there is a desire or priority to rehabilitate in the prison system. I think that it is set up to create greater challenges for prisoners and encourage the revolving door of recidivism. But not for me.

My accomplishments have been both while incarcerated and out in the community. I began to use the time in prison to fill my days and activities with things that supported my manhood and growth as a man. I went through school while incarcerated and received my GED, and I even attended college courses. These are not always easy decisions in prison, and they are not readily available in every institution. I also began to embark on a journey that would be my career path upon leaving prison: counseling and providing support to those around me who shared similar stories and life experiences. I took advantage of every program that was available and gained extensive knowledge through my own studies and self-education.

I began while I was incarcerated with providing support and counseling. Upon my release, I knew that I had to volunteer in my neighborhood to show my commitment. Eventually I landed a job in a non-profit organization. I do not categorize the work that I do as a job; it is more of a calling. I was fortunate enough to gain knowledge and opportunities in a career path that I was born to do. It fuels my passion for helping others and it encourages me to do better, be better, and show others how they can do the same.

Although it is not the norm, my personal transformation to greatness happened while I was incarcerated. I had the blessing of seeing and understanding what it means to be in the belly of the beast. It was enough for me to know that I did not want to be in that position again. Ever! Moreover, I wanted to do everything in my power to help others to avoid that experience in any way I could. I continued to transform into greatness when I became a

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Community Leader. I became a spokesperson/an advocate, and I gained the trust of my community. They recognized me as a leader, and they looked up to me as a role model and an inspiration. My journey was a true transformation into greatness, and it led to me starting my own non-profit organization: Man Up! Inc. I could build a beacon of hope for people who had been through similar challenges and were living in the same conditions.

Being a Mentor is a natural continuation of my current work. In my role as Founder and Executive Director of my non-profit organization, I provide a great deal of mentorship to my team, the participants of my various programs, and to community members. I have directly mentored young people throughout the years of my career as a Community Leader, and it is something that I take great pride in. Mentoring is one of the best ways to show gratitude for your accomplishments and to continue to inspire others to reach their levels of greatness.

My true passion in life is helping others. When I can make a difference in someone else's life, it gives me great satisfaction. Paying it forward is the only path to true greatness. My long-term goals are to write a memoir and a self-help guide for young black men. I also want to teach professionally to provide those students of life, an opportunity to understand how valuable their challenges and mishaps are to their success.