JAHMAL COLE
speaker, writer, activist
I SPEAK because I want to inspire people to change their cities starting at the block level.
I SPEAK because I want to inspire a movement created by people doing what some call small things.
“We, the class of 1988, are determined to be our best in whatever we say or do. We’ll share a smile and lend a hand to our neighbor because no matter what, we’ll be the best in a lifetime.”

That was an excerpt from Jahmal Cole’s preschool graduation speech.

As the founder of Chicago’s fastest-growing social movement, My Block My Hood My City, Jahmal has built his life around a brand of community activism that tears down socio economic divisions.

“We have a poverty of imagination,” Jahmal says when he refers to the stark differences between the city’s black and white neighborhoods.

Jahmal unlocks imaginations through a simple yet profound act: exposure. My Block My Hood My City’s flagship Explorers’ Program brings teenagers from Chicago’s under-resourced neighborhoods to different businesses, NPOs, restaurants, arts spaces, and other establishments. Seeing beyond their neighborhoods allows teens to aspire and set goals.

“I tell my explorers they should have a list of goals in their back pockets,” he said in a speech to incoming students at Northwestern University. “Goals don’t just tell you what to do. They tell you what not to do.”

While the Explorers’ Program flourishes, Jahmal launched his One Block At A Time initiative in May 2018 to reimagine Chicago’s Block Clubs, promoting greater community cohesiveness through service. He also secured a fellowship at Facebook’s Community Leadership Program to use social media to increase interconnectivity among Block Clubs.

“A lot of people say our city is messed up and the politicians are messed up. I think their philosophy is messed up,” Jahmal said during a speech to Block Club presidents. “Democracy starts on a block level.”

“What’s something simple you can do to improve your Block?” Jahmal often asks his volunteers. “You could pick up trash or greet your neighbor. But be careful. If something is easy to do, it’s just as easy not to do it.” Jahmal puts small actions at the forefront of big change.

An author, speaker, and former rapper, Jahmal’s storied life is shaped by humility and service. In a 2018 graduation speech at The Collins Academy, he summed up his relationship with his home city.

“If you can make it in Chicago, you can make it anywhere in the world.”
“We’re going to educate the world about the importance of viewing democracy from a block-level outward versus a big city-level inward.”

“If you can make it in Chicago, you can make it anywhere in the world”

“What could you make yourself do today that will change everything?”
Jahmal is the recipient of the 2018 Chicago Defender Men of Excellence Honoree and the 2018 Chicago City Council Resolution Award. In the same year, he was named one of the “20 Most Inspiring Chicagoans” by Streetwise Magazine and a Chicagoan of the Year by Chicago Magazine.