It was a Monday morning Will Staton will never forget. As a new teacher working in an impoverished Tennessee community, he was eager and idealistic. But arriving at school that day, he was met with distressing news. Over the weekend, one of his students, just 15-years-old, had been shot and killed.

“Alex was a fantastic kid, respectful and smart. When I got the news…it felt like I had been punched in the stomach.”

Beyond the tears he shed that day, Will says Alex’s death had a profound and enduring affect on him. He spent the rest of the school year reflecting on whether he was a good teacher, questioning what he was doing and if he was effective.

“If I couldn’t help Alex, could I really help anyone?” Will was about to discover the answer.

After two years of teaching, which he describes as difficult and demoralizing because of teen pregnancy, drug use, and violence, he understood the scope of the problem facing low-income students in America, and he decided he had to act.

Will’s experience in Tennessee made him appreciate how lucky he was. Education was a high priority in his home. Both his parents held advanced degrees and they had sent him to some of the most prestigious schools in the country. In 2008, during his senior year in college, he became a student recruiter for Teach for America.

“I learned about the achievement/opportunity gap between low and high-income schools while recruiting for TFA. The staggering inequity that existed appalled me.”

That led him to Tennessee, where he witnessed the opportunity gap firsthand and saw the consequences with the tragic death of his student, Alex. His mission became clear—to provide a better education in a positive environment for everyone. “The only way we can secure a better world is by giving everyone that opportunity. That is America’s promise, and we are not living up to it.”

Today, Will is pursuing his personal commitment to that promise by recruiting teachers for a network of public charter schools located in low-income neighborhoods of New York City, Camden, New Jersey and Washington, D.C.
I think teaching is the single most important job in the world. Whatever problems we face now and in the future, only education will equip us to meet them. Providing a first-rate education that empowers individuals and strengthens society is both a moral mandate and a national economic imperative.”

Will says he feels discouraged sometimes about the scale of the problem and the often apathetic public response to it. But he has a powerful incentive to keep working for change. “The murder of my student, Alex, is the motivation that keeps me going. What happened was totally unacceptable. No child deserves that fate.”

“I faced so many pressures to get married, as the cultural context of my country is that a girl should get married at an early age. But again I did not listen to the orthodox society voices; I listened to my inner voice which kindled me to focus on my work.”

Will Staton is a career educator, writer and relentless advocate for overhauling the American public school system which he says is not preparing students to meet the economic, ideological and technical challenges of the 21st century. He is currently pursuing a Master’s Degree in International Relations.

Will Staton is making an impact in the U.S.

Will Staton reads with a class of kindergarten students during preparation for PARCC testing. As a career educator, Will has served as a teacher, school administrator, dean of students, and talent recruiter.