

PREFACE

"Black success should not be an anomaly."

The revelations began once I arrived on the campus of Rutgers University in June of 2005 as a product of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program. Still, in my first year, it was my second semester of history class. I was one of six Black students and approximately 40 white students in attendance. On this particular chilly Spring morning, for some reason, I looked around to see if my peers could relate to any of my experiences growing up in the hood. We had been talking about dysfunctional families for the past few weeks. The discussions were very interesting and disturbing at the same time. As I listened to the silver-haired, white male professor in his 60's, standing in front of the classroom, I felt a weird sensation in the back of my neck. I put my elbow on the desk and grabbed my neck, and looked down at my lap to ensure I did not make eye contact. I was surprised that my tiny neck-hairs were standing at full attention.

By now the professor had made on full lap across the room. With his left hand in the pocket of his khakis, and trademark navy sweater vest, he swayed as he spoke. He went on to explain the attributes of dysfunction, including one or

more family members being addicted to drugs or alcohol, constant household conflict, unpredictability, instability and physical, verbal, emotional or sexual abuse. In all, the sum total of daily drama.

Then, it hit me like a ton of bricks! *Dude, the Spears family is dysfunctional!* I thought to myself. Of course, I had a general understanding of what dysfunction meant, but there was never a label or judgment connected to it as it related to my upbringing. In my mind, it was always, “*Man, my mom’s crazy!*” I began to fidget in my seat. My palms got cold, yet the rest of my body felt warmer than usual. I tried to gauge the facial expressions and body language of two Black students within my view. Either they were great poker players or they just never experienced *any* type of dysfunction in their lives. Totally blank. I tilted my head down and stared at my desk. *I can’t be the only one*, I whispered.

All of a sudden, the feeling of not being good enough crept inside. My next reaction to the professor’s lecture was to become defensive. He had no idea that his comments and analysis were hitting home concerning my chaotic upbringing in the Booker T. Projects, in Jersey City - the hood. I really wanted to raise my hand and say, “Me and my neighbors were borrowing sugar from each other a few times a week. You can never have enough sugar to make Kool-Aid,” or better yet, “After a drunken fight, between my neighbors and my family, everyone still loved each other the next day.” I felt conflicted because I wanted to weigh in on my reality, yet I was too embarrassed to comment. I had hundreds of

stories to fill each criterion.

I later learned about Survivor's Remorse, where the "surviving" member has to be responsible (financially) for the rest of the family. The professor also spoke about irresponsible behaviors like paying for sneakers or other ancillary services before taking care of the primary needs of a family. I identified with that because there were several times our lights were cut off, but we kept up with the Jones' and had the latest outfit or gadget.

Sitting in history class on that Tuesday morning was the first time I felt disenfranchised. It was like I didn't qualify to be there. I heard it in the pitch of people's voices when they questioned me with the sound of surprise, "*You, go to Rutgers?*" I didn't understand what the big deal was. My response was simple: "Yeah, I applied and got in!" However, on that day, this history class lecture created an urgent desire for me to re-examine my life. In hindsight, I consider that classroom experience in Spring 2006, my first "woke" moment.

As a young black male growing up in Jersey City, New Jersey, I wasn't supposed to be successful. Obviously, the definition of success varies from person-to-person, but society tends to measure it in dollars and tangible possessions. In the hood, male success could be defined as being 17 years old and never been locked up or a hustler. Truthfully, not being shot is also high on the list of achievements. Therefore, finishing high school *and* college is definitely a successful accomplishment on many levels, but such a feat was not even on

the radar in my community.

Amongst my peers, the common blueprint for a kid in the projects starts out being raised by a single mother on welfare with limited education. As the kid gets older, he becomes ingrained with a misinformed symbolic street cred of his future: drug dealer, drug addict, bum, stick-up kid, streetballer, locked up or dead. Any other aspirations that a young man like myself had of a positive future would have to take a back seat to overall survival. I am bothered that this outlook has been the norm for young black men in the hood for too long. This dynamic is both a generational and historical tragedy.

Many people inside and outside of my hood see the fact that I became successful in spite of my upbringing, as an anomaly; both spoken and unspoken. “It’s-a-great-thing-you-made-it-out!” resonates as false accolades in an environment where people live “by any means necessary.” *Why was I one of the few who made it out?* I’ve asked myself that question numerous times. *What made me different?* I was outgoing, charismatic and had a knack for building relationships and working with people. I was very task-oriented, and goal-driven at an early age. Another one of my strong points was that I had the ability to create something out of nothing.

When you think about it, if the scenario described a white boy in a white community, the “anomaly” would be that he’s a deadbeat or “will never amount to anything.” I want to bring attention to the biased societal lens and show the

disparity between the odds of a young black boy becoming successful, versus the optimistic future outlook of the young Caucasian male.

*"We are tied together in the single garment of destiny,
caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.
And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."*

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I hope to demonstrate how our black boys are set up for failure because of the images displayed in the media, as well as the ill-informed expectations that are placed upon them, especially when it comes to making money, being irresponsible, and taking advantage of women. I want to help bridge the gap and provide love and acceptance to young black men who have been abandoned by their families, the system, and society at large. Each of us that have "made it" should play a part in bringing our young brothers up to help them navigate more positive paths in life.

Although I don't agree, I can see why the white male glorifies his success as a means to justify racism, when he proudly states, "I'm not a racist. There is a system in which hard work equals success!" It pains me when I think about why this "equal work system" is not accessible to those in my community, and if it was, then we all would have a better chance of making it out. I've worked hard for my success as an educator in various math disciplines, and educational leadership, and I am working even harder to give back to underserved

communities.

This book has been pressing in my heart and spirit for a few years. I have found that by being intentional and perceptively woke, I can positively influence the lives of young people and present them with a realistic plan, as well as hope for a better future. One of my favorite math topics has always been Geometry. It's one of those subjects where you have to understand the congruence and similarity of properties often, very much the same way in life. Almost like in the children's picture book, *Math Curse*, which illustrates how math literally plays an aspect in several areas of our daily lives without realizing it. Even if we take the numbers out of the equation, the definitions and concepts from a relational perspective are clear and relevant.

As you will see, there are several math-related concepts and metaphors to explain key points in my life, as well as to tap into those "wake up call" situations to help readers make changes in their lives. There are eight chapters. Even though seven is the number of completion, eight represents my return to my community and new beginnings. I believe there is a recipe for mentoring and connecting people, regardless of where you are from or where you currently live. I want to be that example, the guinea pig so to speak, for high school and college students, parents, teachers, and administrators, that despite the lack of a fruitful pedigree, young black men can succeed in STEM fields or any field they desire.

I have no problem standing in the mirror to offer readers a candid, transparent view of my circumstances, and use my life and these formulas as a vehicle to help you achieve your dreams. No matter what you have been through, as long as you have breath, your dreams are valid and can be lived out fearlessly. Stay positive. Remain focused. Be diligent. Ask questions. Seek mentors. Your future self is waiting for you to step into your destiny. You're the answer to solving the problems in your hood and in society. Believe in yourself, start in your neighborhood, and together we can make positive, radical changes one hood at a time.