

Keyonn Anthony Wright Sheppard

### To the Youth, I Offer Perverserance

My name is Keyonn Anthony Wright Sheppard and I am a husband and father of three. I am from Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York. My wife and I live at home with our 5 year old son. My two daughters are from prior relationships. I am the eldest of eight children, six boys and two girls, half of which have been incarcerated including myself. You never regret your bad decisions as much until someone you love repeats them.

My parents separated before I was born and divorced by the time I was two. My mother moved us across country to California with her new husband, and soon, my brother was born. But the marriage deteriorated quickly, and I became a child of a single black mother who additionally was drug-dependent. My mother sold drugs in order to feed her habit or sold drugs and accumulated a habit. I'm not sure which I was a child at the time. Regardless, one way or the other, I learned about the sale and use of drugs very early in my life. Unfortunately, the same things that caused my mother to be arrested on occasions in my childhood cause me to do the same. The first time that I was incarcerated I was still in high school. The experience was uncomfortable but not so terrifying that it caused me to change my behavior. However, later on in life, those situations and circumstances would become a bit more severe and their extremity would cause my permanent paradigm shift.

Incarceration will give you time to think, if nothing else. Part of what I had the opportunity to think about was how disappointed I was in myself for being so brilliant and behaving so stupidly. They say that hindsight is 20/20 vision, mine showed me that I needed to go in a different direction once I got the opportunity. If I was given the opportunity, I'd never look back and continue to walk down a path that was going to lead me in a positive direction!

I understand that prison is a modern configuration of slavery for melanated people. The media causes people to perceive men of color as menacing and threatening; Even the police department is trained to enforce the laws differently for people of color than they are for others, because the courts have ruled that Black bodies can be seen as a weapon. However, I believe in investing my time, energy and effort into positive things that will prove to be successful in my life. If I can divert my attention from things that lead to jail and invest time and energy in things that lead to success at least I'm adding to the solution and not the problem!

I have been blessed to go to seminary, complete my certification courses, obtain my license, and asked to teach two classes from which I graduated at the top. I am grateful for, and take pride in, my position as a youth advocate. It gives me the opportunity to prepare young people who come out of similar situations to mine and overcome any and every challenge life has for them. I feel like the work that I do helps provide options and resources that young people would otherwise lack and exposes them to things outside of their norm. Being a mentor is the most personally rewarding work I've ever done; because, I patch up the holes that society has left in our neighborhoods.

I thank God for leading me into my path of greatness. As a child, I just wanted to grow up and be who I didn't have and provide what I didn't get. I feel that my faith—that there was a higher power than myself—propelled me further than I imagined and led me to this place. A deep desire

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to right the wrongs I did in my youth made me a better man. Today I'm a successful husband, father, minister, man and mentor. I don't credit myself as such because I'm flawless but because I always give my 100% effort towards the most peaceful and positive outcome.

I look forward to continuing my education until ultimately being a doctor of sociology. I intend to start an organization in Brooklyn that assists predominantly melanated men. I feel that this population is a severely marginalized group that receives little to no assistance. Moreover, if this component of our community was supported it would strengthen our community as a whole. I intend to network with other organizations citywide to create 'best practice' models and then practice them until we cover the entire country!