

Walden Anderson Sr.
Homework Assignment

September 11, 2017

The Love of Family is Everything

My name is Walden Anderson and I currently live in Bushwick Brooklyn, but I'm staying at my Uncle Jake's apartment in Rochdale Village, in Jamaica, Queens. I look after him and make sure he's okay. Uncle Jake is not in the best of health these days, so I agreed to be his primary caregiver, until he relocates to the South sometime next year, in order to be closer to relatives. Originally, I grew up in the South Bronx, on 169th Street & Washington Avenue. There were two parks, one on the side of my building, and another one in the back of my building. The park near the side of my building was known as the "front park", where my friends and I played every game imaginable. We played "Black-Out-1,2,3", "Scalsies", "Kick the-can", "Ringo leavia", "Frisbee", and other games we had at our disposal back in the days.

The back park, behind my building, was used for playing softball and basketball, because there was more space for those types of things. Also, the back park had a basketball court, where I used to battle my older brothers. Since I am the youngest out of 7 children, (4 brothers and 2 sisters), I used to get taken advantage of because I was the youngest. But I was also the daredevil of the family, so you can imagine the types of injuries I suffered because of it. For instance, when I was 11 years old, I was in another park, (Maxwell Park), up the block from my house with my best friends, Jeff and Joe, on the swings. The swings were surrounded by a high fence that was adjacent to the basketball court there, and my friends and I used to have competitions on the swings to see which one of us could land the highest on the fence by doing an apple turn-over off of the swings. An apple turn-over is a maneuver that's performed on the swing by laying down, while the swing is in motion, then flipping through the air, at the right time, and connecting with the fence, or you can flip through the air and land on the ground.

Well, on this particular day, I decided to try for the ultimate turn-over, and try to land at the very top of the fence. That way, Jeff and Joe couldn't beat my feat, even if they did the very same move as me. Now, in order to go really high on a swing, you must get a running start, by holding on to the chains on your swing, then jump up, and pump your legs to get a really good rhythm. I had all of that, and then some. Then you sit down, still pumping your legs to stay at your desired height. After that, the rest is calculation and execution.

I've done it so many times, that it was like second nature to me. Well, for some reason, this day, my calculations, or my execution was a little off, because instead of landing on the top of the fence, as planned, I went completely over the top of it and landed on the basketball court, breaking my right arm. The crazy part about it all is that, I didn't know my arm was broken until I tried to get back on the swing. That's when I saw the bone sticking out of my right arm. As you can imagine, I was in excruciating pain, and my friend Joe ran down the block to let my family know what happened to me, as I literally ran to the hospital two blocks away.

By the time I got there, all of my brothers arrived a few minutes behind me. That was the day I realized that they loved me, because they made the biggest scene in the emergency room on my

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behalf. They tried to get someone to take care of me, because I was sitting there for what seemed like hours hurting like crazy. When my mother got there, she made sure I was as comfortable as I could've been, despite the pain. I have to admit, I didn't always get along with my older siblings when I was growing up. Partly, it had to do with me being the youngest and all, but after I broke my arm, my older brothers treated me differently. Gone were the days of taking advantage of me, and in its place was a sense of love and inclusion. We were very close, especially, my older brother and I, William. He was 5 years older than I, but he treated me as an equal, rather than his little brother, which I really appreciated.

From That point forward, I had a new awareness that I had a loving family. My mother was a religious woman, who had raised my brothers and me, while my two oldest sisters lived with relatives elsewhere. I used to see one of my sisters, (the oldest out of all of my siblings), when my mother used to take me with her to Pensacola, Florida, to visit my Grandmother and other family members who lived in the area.

In contrast, I never saw my other sister, the second oldest out of my siblings, at all when I was growing up, but my mother had talked about her frequently for as long as I could remember for years. I remember my father being there at one point, and then he wasn't there. In the latter part, I was about 5 years of age. I didn't see him again, until I was around 9 years old. Out of all of my brothers, he used to come to our apartment and have me stay with him. While my mother was the disciplinarian, who didn't smoke tobacco or drink alcohol, my father was the laid back one who was also an alcoholic. You can imagine the arguments that they had any time he was drunk. I guess things had finally taken its toll.

Regardless of all of that, my mother made sure we had food on the table, and clean clothes to wear, even though, we were living off of welfare. I didn't have a sense of being rich or poor. The only thing I knew was that sometimes I would get something I had wanted and sometimes I wouldn't. It made no difference to me, in that aspect. However, I did know what love felt like. Don't get me wrong, we had our share of drama and problems like any other family, but we also had closeness and love in our household.

For instance, the first time I had ever gotten arrested and incarcerated, my brother, William, bailed me out. It was 1987, and at the time of my arrest, there was a warrant out for my arrest, because I had failed to appear at court for not paying my fare. That was the first time that I had landed on Rikers Island, which was scary, because of all of the stories involving violence I had heard about. These included cuttings, stabbings, prisoner fights, beat downs from correction officers, muggings in the middle of the night in the dorms where prisoners stayed at, and much more.

Fortunately, I didn't experience any of those things. I was lucky, because my oldest brother, Anthony, (who we called Junior), knew a lot of guys that were locked up on Rikers Island, whom some of I knew. So I was protected because my oldest brother Junior had a reputation, and because of it, the older guys who knew that I was his little brother looked out for me. In my

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community, back then, if someone got arrested and sent to Rikers Island, or did time upstate, then that person was the talk of the neighborhood for a few days, or a couple of weeks, until the next person became the talk of the neighborhood. It all depended on the crime committed, that the neighborhood paid most interest to. It was as if getting arrested was expected; that it was normal.

Unfortunately, I got so caught up in the hype of the streets with drugs and crime that I went from Rikers Island stints to a full blown 22 year-to-life sentence in no time. It was then that I was able to form an opinion about the prison system and whether or not there is a thing called justice. From my personal experience, the criminal justice system is broken and corrupt. The level of abuse throughout the criminal justice system is so wide spread—from the point of arrest, through the process of court, to being a ward of the state. However, and this might seem weird, I do believe there is justice. But, the system itself does not reflect it. What I mean is that the prison system has its uses, in theory. However, the reality is that systemic abuse is so deeply ingrained throughout the criminal justice system, that it's impossible to see any type of justice within it.

Despite these odds, I was able to accomplish numerous things while I was incarcerated; I obtained my G.E.D. within my first four months in county jail. And when I was convicted and sent to state prison, I met a lot of other prisoners who were illiterate, so I became a teacher's aide to help them. I participated in several self-help programs that I believed was beneficial to me, and ultimately, I graduated college my twenty-second year of incarceration. As I set about to accomplish these things, and more, I met some good individuals who encouraged me to pursue positive activities to make the environment around me a better place, thus transforming myself in the process.

However, my personal transformation was a process that had taken years to actualize. Because I had to spend so many years incarcerated, I had to forget everything that I believed and start all over mentally. In essence, incarceration had stripped me bare and I had to reorganize my life in all aspects: mentally, physically, and spiritually. During all of this, I also became involved in programs that promoted social work in the community and had a chance encounter with the Executive Director of Young New Yorkers. And the rest is history. My job as a teacher at Young New Yorkers has given me a sense of accomplishing what had I set out to do when I initially started talking about giving back to the community with other likeminded brothers I met in prison years ago.

As I reflect, I believe that I have a story to tell that is relevant to the wellbeing of today's youth, as well as society at large. This is why I want to be a mentor, to not see anyone else experience the things that I had during my 22 years of incarceration. I just want to make my environment a better place to be in, and to live successfully and positively and be someone that my family could be proud of. In the end, I want to obtain my Master's Degree in Social Work, finally become financially independent, and remain the person who I am today: humbled, blessed, and determined to always do the right thing.