

Lemus: Hello, my name is Kimberly and on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, the Center for Transforming Communities we'd like to thank you for sharing your story with us today.

Brown: You're welcome.

Holmes: All right, so my name is Kerwin Holmes, Jr. and I'm also with Crossroads to Freedom, and the first question I'd like to ask is could you please tell us your name?

Brown: My name is Derrick Brown.

Holmes: Okay, and you graduated from Treadwell?

Brown: I did graduate from Treadwell.

Holmes: What year?

Brown: In 1999.

Holmes: Okay. How was Treadwell, how was it like going to Treadwell?

Brown: Back then Treadwell was like a big family. Everybody knew everybody. It wasn't hard to be popular. It was like a family just like the neighborhood. The same people you see at home after school were the same people you saw at school, so it was like a continuation of what you saw at home. So it's like a big family.

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Holmes: Okay, how long did you stay at Treadwell?

Brown: I was, I was at Treadwell from ninth grade to 12th grade.

Holmes: So it was a high school when you –

Brown: Just high school.

Holmes: Just high school. Okay, did you participate in any activities, any sports?

Brown: Well I played football. I ran track, played baseball, drill team. I think that's it.

Holmes: Wow. How was it like playing football? Were there a lot of parents at your games?

Brown: Sort of. At the football games you had the faithful few that came to all the games. The teachers, like Ms. Dunn and people like that. But I wouldn't say it was a whole lot of participation from parents but there was some. I wouldn't say it was overwhelming. We had the same people in the stands every Friday.

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Holmes: Okay, so what do you do now in the community?

Brown: Well now I'm teaching at Riverview Middle School, Special Ed in seventh grade. I'm also the founder of the Academy, which is a non-profit organization that centers around children with learning disabilities.

Holmes: Okay, what do you do at that program specifically?

Brown: Well what the Academy is, we have, well transitional planning along with Memphis City Schools. A lot of time you may have someone who has difficulty learning and you may, you may bypass some of the small things that they'd need to know about and just growing up in life.

[00:03:00] So we aid in the process of things like filling out applications, what to do on an interview, what to say, what to wear, job shadowing, things of that nature. We also have a program called T_____ to Teen where children can bring their report cards and earn studio time to record their music. So if you make three A's there's ten minutes per A, five minutes per B, three minutes per C, and for D's and F's you subtract. And you get another ten minutes for every one hour of community service that you do.

[00:04:00] So all in all the Academy, what we like to do is give chances to students who maybe have been overlooked and the overachievers and the ones who are doing better to aid in the process of them having an equal chance at life after graduation, because one thing that I am noticing is that there is a direct correlation between crime and Special Education or learning disabilities. Because when you have problems reading and you are not as fast as everyone else around you, you look for other mean, you look for other means and ways to get your needs met. And a lot of people, a lot of children after graduation they turn to a life of crime or they may do some criminal activities to stay ahead and stay with the bunch and, that's what we don't want.

So the Academy is tackling crime through education. You see what I'm saying?

Holmes: I do.

Lemus: How did you become interested in helping children with disabilities?

[00:05:00]

Brown: I found out that I had a disability, a learning disability when I was working on my master's at Christian Brothers University. I have something that's called dyslexia and, I would like for kids who have disabilities to understand that having a disability shouldn't be a hindrance. There are ways, there are still ways you can learn. There are still ways you can get ahead, stay ahead, and be at the top.

So through my education I am trying to be an example for children who have disabilities to show them that hey, I may have a disability but I can do it. He got a master's degree. He went on to get a doctrine. So if he can do it, I can do it.

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So that's one of the reasons I decided to work with children with disabilities. And another reason was just because I feel like I have a heart for it and it's easy for me to teach all kinds of kids. So it really didn't have to be children with learning disabilities. It could be General Ed. I think that's where my calling is, so when you ask me to teach a child I can do it.

So in a nutshell it's just I feel like my calling is to work with children with disabilities.

Holmes: Okay. So what age groups do you work with?

Brown: Right now or with teaching?

Holmes: With right now.

Brown: Right now I'm working with five year olds to 12, right now at the Crock Center. But when I, when I start teaching in the fall I'll be with seventh grade, so it's roughly 13 year olds. Is it 13?

[00:07:00]

Holmes: I think so.

Brown: Thirteen.

Holmes: _____ thirteen.

Brown: Twelve and 13 year olds. So it will be around the junior high area.

Holmes: Okay. Of your kids that you mentor in this Academy program are they high risk, as in do they live in neighborhoods that _____ crime?

Brown: Yes. This is my target, high risk neighborhood-, high risk neighborhoods and children from disadvantaged circumstances where they may come from families who live in impoverished neighborhoods or hoods, places where they might not get their needs met.

[00:08:00] So I feel like those kids are the ones that are at the greatest risk of turning to crime, because that's what you're around. And if that's what you're around all day and somebody gives you an opportunity to make some money, you might go ahead on and take that opportunity.

So I'm trying to be on every corner, every store, every crack corner, everywhere children are to show them that hey, you don't have to go that way. There are other ways. Because one thing that I eluded to tell you is that the Academy does pay minimum wage to the children who go through the program. So it's like you are at work. When you are late to work you are docked. You learn how to work. You learn what your supervisor expects from you because a lot of people start working not knowing what's expected of them.

[00:09:00] And especially if you have learning disabilities you might go in, you might go in expecting one thing and another thing is expected of you. And a lot of times you can look at a person and you won't be able to tell what their disability is or you won't, you won't know and it will cause them to fail, get fired and have a lifetime of learned helplessness where they expect to fail.

And it always ends the same way. It's not good. It ends in a mind that is easily to be manipulated. And those kind of things can be, it doesn't have to be that way.

So with the right, with the right teaching and the right molding children with disabilities and that come from impoverished backgrounds or are at high risk levels they can be helped also.

Holmes: Does most of work center around the Highland Heights community or the Treadwell community?

Brown: Yes.

Holmes: Okay. Are there any, do you know if any other organizations that also do the work that you do, sort of like helping them out besides the Academy?

[00:10:00]

Brown: There are other organizations, but this is what we are primarily doing. There may be some places that are doing it secondary, but this is our primary focus with children with disabilities and, not only children with disabilities but the General Ed too, because their assigned program, it's called Higher Learning, their assigned program is for General Ed too so you don't have to be, you don't have to have a learning disability to be a part of the Academy.

Holmes: Okay. So what's one change that you see happening mostly occurring or the most common change you see in these kids that you are working with?

[00:11:00]

Brown: The thing that I see the most is confidence. Where as you may have a child who may start who may be reclusive or may not talk as much or might not have a lot of friends, once you get to dealing with them and showing them other ways and other means, and you get to building that bond with them, they start to get their confidence that you need to survive, that you need to become successful in today's society.

[00:12:00] So I think the No. 1 thing is before all is confidence. And then I see great starts arise and that all stems from having the confidence to believe you can do something. When you believe you can do something your whole demeanor changes and you feel like you can do more. It's, you don't feel like you're going to fail at the beginning before you get the test, because that's how to a lot of kids before they even get the chance they already feel like they're going to fail the test.

So that's not the right way to think. So once you get them to conquer small goals a little bit at a time, and it's a ladder, and once they get used to winning in, get used to being successful, it becomes a norm and, that's what we want.

Lemus: What other ideas do you have for kids to perform better?

[00:13:00] *Brown:* I would say Team Work, another program that we have at the Academy. It's not up yet, but it's for young men to learn skills like learn how to fix cars, how to repair your house, how to cut grass, how to maintain the things that you do have. Because I feel like in order for Memphis to get better it starts with the man, and before it starts with the man it starts with the child, the boy.

So if you have strong boys to grow up to be strong men, it in turn starts a domino effect on the whole City. It might seem small to the mind but once it actually happens and we're all over the City and we're doing this, you will start to see the changes and you will see the City become a better place all because you know where to tackle crime rate.

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Right now crime is being combated on the criminal level after you do the crime, or there are some places that do preventative measures, but they might not go back as far as we go back. Just when I, I used to work at a place called _____. Well I was actually working there last year and most of the kids, I would say 99 percent of the kids in that facility they are 18 and under. Let me tell _____ is. It's a lockdown facility for children who are 18 and under who are in the State's custody, taken away from their parents and put in jail.

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And as I walk around that place 99 percent, I would say 99 percent of those kids have a learning disability. And when they are in class you ask them to read and the first thing they do, if they can't read they won't say I can't read. They will act out and like throw the book or push the book away and say I don't want to do this. Okay you're acting out because you have a disability and you can't read.

So what's, what's, what would be the mirror of that? On the outside world? So if in an enclosed situation you push a book away and you act out in class that's considered disruptive behavior. Okay if you're out on the street and you can't read and you feel like you can't get your needs met, you can't get a good job, and it's just dominoing up on you and you just at the end, what's the, what, what would be the same thing as that person acted up in class as that person out in the real world. You all commit a crime.

[00:16:00]

Now it's dominoing and you're going to find a way to stay up with the Joneses. You're going to find a way to eat. You're going to find a way to get your needs met no matter what, no matter, to you it might seem the same, but to society you are copping out and it's just not the right thing to do.

Did I answer your question?

Holmes:

Yes sir. Yeah you did. Are there any other things you would like to tell us about this Memphis and the program? Any words of encouragement or anything?

Brown: I do all the, first of all when I, when I look on the Internet and I see Memphis ranked No. 3 in worst cities to live in it hurts because I grew up here. And to me I know Memphis is not the greatest city to live in, but top three worst cities to live in because of crime, you know there's something to be looked at.

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This city is not that bad, is not as bad as the media or other people make us out to be. They want to nickname us the first 48 city and stuff like that. That's not, that's not us.

So it, for me to wake up in the morning and have the motivation to keep going, to want to combat crime, and to want to help children with disabilities because I know what the future can hold. If you don't, if you don't remedy it the right way it can, it can domino into something a lot larger than just dyslexia or ADHD, ADD, or bipolarism. It can get a lot bigger.

[00:18:00] So it's words of encouragement to anyone who sees this or anyone in this room I will say to never give up because it may seem so cliché, you always hear people say never give up, but to actually look into that phrase and to actually know what that phrase is saying it's so easy to give up.

I look at people all the time just standing on the street. It's the easiest thing to do. It's hard to want to be something in life. It's hard to wake up in the morning and you have to go somewhere. It's hard to do those things and you lose rest. You know it's very easy to get up in the morning and you don't have to do anything but just lay in the bed because you don't have any goals.

[00:19:00] When you find yourself losing sleep and you find yourself working and you lose track of the time, then you know you're doing something, you know you are progressing. You are helping your city. You are doing things that you need to do to stay ahead, get ahead.

And the thing that I want to always say to kids and even grownups is to always give back. The farther you go up it is your duty, it's your duty to give back. To bring it back to the people who are still in the situation that you started in. You have no choice. You have to give back.

It comes with success. The other end of success is giving back. There's no way around it. You are not successful if you succeed in your mind and you haven't come back to help your brother or your sister.

So, that's what I would say.

Holmes: We'd like to thank you for coming to give your story on Memphis and we hope that you continue to do well where you are. Thank you.

[00:20:00]

Brown: Thank you.

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