



All youth ready for college, work & life.

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Good morning. Needless to say, I'm very nervous. I have a lot that I want to say and not a whole lot of time to say it in, so I'm going to go straight to it. First of all, I want to say thank you for coming out here today because your presence here tells me you're committed to change and that is a wonderful thing from my perspective. I want to thank my friends, my teachers, my mentors —Karen and Merita for thinking long and hard and so diligently about this great initiative that's taking off today.

First I want to say, as a youth advocate it is my duty, it is my passion, it is my honor to bring what I've learned back to my community -- for young people that don't have those types of opportunities. All too often, it has become our norm now -- young black men such as myself are not standing in this position. You don't see a whole lot of me. As my mother said, I am an anomaly. And as an anomaly, I'm hard and difficult to place. I am peculiar. I am irregular. I am undefined in some aspects. When she said it to me, I was like hmm... maybe. But then I started to think about it, it was very true and then I started to ask myself why is it that way? Why am I an anomaly?

Well, to give you the background, it's important for you all to understand the big picture. Being leaders of youth development, it's important to understand that your voice carries to your young people. If you can translate the big picture change down to very layman terms, if you can translate to a young person the importance of it, they will grasp the concept of the big picture. The importance of that in the long term is longevity. We all just talked about longevity up here -- why is it important to give back to the community, why is it important to instill into your young people the drive and desire for higher education? Well, believe it or not five or ten years from now, we're going to be the same young people that are going to be looking for your jobs. We're going to be the same young people that are out there in the workforce and I would hope and I would pray that we have done our job properly so that when it is time for them to take over, time for us I should say, to take over we will be prepared to do not just a great but a phenomenal job.

So what brings me here today and what brings me to talk to you? Mobilizing youth is a key part of the solution. You have to get your youth on the same page, you have to give them inspiration to challenge them to seek higher education, to seek the hard questions to answer and define the hard questions. You have to put it on the table and let them internalize it and make it their own. Only then will they own up to it, will they create, and you'll be amazed by what happens when you give a young person the tools they need to succeed and step back and watch them create. It's amazing.

A prime example in Nashville, TN is the non-profit Community IMPACT, Nashville, which was a leadership organization in the East Nashville community. One of the phenomenal things that this organization has done is create college access. College access was an idea that was kind of thrown around our table. The big questions were why is our community suffering the way it is, why are young people not getting into college, why are young people not succeeding in the way that we think they should be? Well, students grabbed this concept and they ran with it. Our young people decided they were going to come up with the research ideas, they were going to do the research to find it out—is it teen pregnancy, is it

drugs, is it alcohol? What is causing our community to be the way that it is? They came up with a survey and they distributed it to 6,000 students in the Nashville community, through the 3 local high schools in Nashville.

What they found in the survey was that about 93% of students have the desire to go to college. So the passion was there, the drive was there but what they found was that young people didn't know how to get there. My graduating class of 2003, as freshmen we came in 657 students strong. By the time we walked across the stage in 2003, there were only 187 students. Of that 187 students, only 35 percent actually graduated. Of that 35 percent that actually graduated, only about 40 percent went to college. Of that 40 percent that went to college, only 35 percent graduated within four years. I was one of those.

The transformation that took place was once they found this information, once they wrapped their minds around it and thought about it differently, they asked- how can we change this? They came to find in the most extreme cases that they had one guidance counselor for 600 students. That task is impossible. I would never want to be a guidance counselor if I had to deal with 600 students that were trying to further their education. It was impossible. So, it became a local crisis. How do we change this? Well, they decided to write up a report to put the statistics out there, to help people learn the data and challenge people. This is what we need to succeed- can you meet it?

With young people you really have to learn to meet them where they are. You can't expect them to just know. Because we are young people, we mess up. We need your guidance, we need your leadership, we need your knowledge. But in understanding youth development, you have to understand where your young people are. I work at the Martha O'Brien Center in East Nashville, Tennessee- my old stomping ground. This is where I grew up, so I know a lot of the issues that these kids are going through. And to understand why they react to me in certain ways, I really have to understand and I know now what they are going through. Some of these kids are facing real life situations knowing that if they go home they may or may not have a meal to eat, if they go home their parents may or may not be there. In some cases, if they are there, they are bombarded with issues of drunkenness, drug relations. It's all out there, so these kids are facing it on a day to day basis and therefore when it is time to focus on education, they're just scattered. They can't focus because they don't have the basic necessities at home to build upon.

So the challenge here today isn't whether there is passion there or how do we inspire it. The passion and the inspiration is there, it's about bringing precision to that passion, it's about understanding the root causes and not just putting a band-aid on it. It is not about just creating a program because kids do not grow up in programs, they grow up in places. Therefore, we need to change the places in which our young people are growing up -- that will have a bigger impact in the long run when we're talking about longevity. So when we find out what's missing in these communities, we see that a lot of times that parents aren't there. It does take a village to raise a child. It does take a community -- it's not just schools, it's not just non-profit organizations, it's not just leadership activities. It takes a force to move forward and actually change some of the things that are going on, in order for young people to succeed.

I've been very impatient with doing a lot of talking. It's time to act, it's time to be about business. It's time to do things differently because up to this point, no disrespect, it just hasn't worked. In some respects it has gotten worse. It is our duty, our drive to do better. So, I thank the Forum for bringing me out here and thank you all for listening to my words.

I forgot the punch line and I always do this because I get so excited about talking about it. So what's going on now? College Access is out in the local community of Nashville, TN. They are changing the way business is being done. I'm glad to celebrate the eighth generation of mobilizers in Nashville, TN. These young people are doing phenomenal things. They are the movers and shakers of the non-profit world in my mind. And because they know what they are talking about and they know how to put it out there, they will indeed be ready by 21.

Pittman: Eric is too modest. In rushing him to get to the punch line, I wanted to give you the data because this is an example of changing the way we do business and seeing an impact. We're talking about metrics and we're talking about data. Eric is here today because he was part of the first class of youth mobilizers that took on key issues like college access, took on issues like closing down check cashing businesses, making sure that families were filing EITC and bringing money back into their community. And I just want him to rattle off numbers now. He told you the depressing numbers of how few young people that entered high school came out and how few went on to college. I want him to tell you the numbers of what's happening in East Nashville now because of the efforts of young people.

Polk: As I said earlier, in 2003, only 35 percent of the students in my high school graduated. In 2007, that number doubled so now it's at 70 percent graduation rates. So in four years, the impact has gone from doing a little bit of nothing to doing bigger and better things, so now our young people are seeing the change and they are actively acting on it and that's the bigger picture.

Pittman: Eric was one of the first class of mobilizers and the first class of changemakers. I think that Governor Ridge mentioned it and Congressman Gephardt mentioned it, when we're talking about leaders we are talking about people who use their capacity, their motivation and whatever resources they have to make a difference. So I'm really pleased to give Eric the first Ready by 21 Changemaker award for changing his community.