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THIS MAN NEVER THOUGHT HE'D BE ANY KIND OF LEADER — NOW HE'S RAISING PEOPLE UP IN CHICAGO

BY ANDREW THOMAS, JUNE 4, 2018



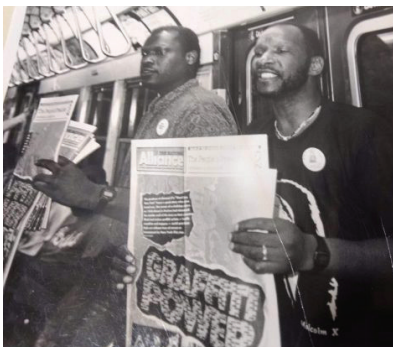
Unfortunately, he grew up in an environment that was poor, dangerous, and didn't offer a lot of opportunities for young people. A street in a slum area of Harlem, c. 1965. (Central Press/Getty Images)

was only 33 to breast cancer when he was young, and was raised by a single father with his brother and sister.

Fortunately, Cherry's father was a positive male influence in his life growing up. He was an activist and was always trying to find ways to uplift everyone in their community.

"I really saw him as my idol in many ways, so I didn't want to do anything that would let him down or disappoint him," Cherry told The Epoch Times.

"In New York City, growing up in the 60s, 70s, and into the 80s there was a lot of violence in my neighborhoods both in Harlem and in the Bronx. I wound up losing classmates either to violence, or some classmates to getting incarcerated," Cherry recalled.



Cherry (left) on the New York subway in 1990. (Courtesy of Derek Beckwith)

"It was just tough to see because he was a very talented boy who was great with creating rhymes, a great writer, was very smart, but got attracted to the gang life," Cherry explained.

Cherry didn't visualize a fulfilling future growing up, particularly after witnessing the poverty and violence he had experienced in his neighborhood and his high school.

Growing up in a violent, impoverished neighborhood doesn't offer a lot of hope for the future. However, a chance meeting changed this man's life, and now he's helping others break the cycle.

David Cherry was born in Harlem, and grew up in the Bronx during the late 1960s and 1970s when these neighborhoods were the epitome of poverty and violence in the U.S.

Cherry lost his mother who was young, and was raised by a

It was difficult for Cherry to continue witnessing losing people who were close to him.

Cherry had a close friend named Eddy who he had known since the third grade. By eighth grade, Eddy was an enforcer in a gang.

Eddy would miss days in school, but Cherry would try his best to tutor him.

When Cherry was 13, Eddy dropped out of school and ended up in the criminal justice system.

"I was looking around me and didn't really see very many options. I didn't really see much for myself outside of just trying to survive the poverty and violence of the communities," Cherry remembered.

"I didn't think there was anything I could do to make a difference with anybody. I was more in survival mode."

After high school, Cherry worked several minimum wage jobs in warehouses.

"I felt proud that I wasn't doing anything illegal, but it was very depressing. I just felt like there was no hope that I would ever



Even though he was a working man, he didn't feel a sense of fulfillment. Cherry third from the right. (Courtesy of Derek Beckwith)

accomplish much more than being simply a marginal, minimum wage worker," Cherry said.

However, a chance encounter on the street in Harlem would change his perspective.

In 1989, Cherry was 28 and met a woman named Lenora Fulani.

Fulani was a volunteer with and co-founder of a community development program called the All Stars Project, and she invited him to a meeting they were having that evening.

At the meeting, Fulani and her colleagues invited Cherry to help volunteer too.

"I was really struck by that because my feeling was 'I don't know how to do very many things,'" Cherry recalled.

However, Fulani assured him that they would show him the ropes.

Cherry began participating in community outreach on the street.

He and his colleagues would encourage residents to sign up for community programs such as the All Stars Project Talent Show, which gives youth the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and grow in their communities.

He also learned how to raise money, and how to talk about

the organization's mission to combat poverty through the "developmental power of performance."

"There was a change that was happening because I started seeing I could do things that I didn't think I had any capability of doing," Cherry said.

"I couldn't have imagined going into the community and just speaking to strangers and signing them up for different activities. I couldn't have imagined going into the Upper West Side of Manhattan or Lower Manhattan or out to Queens and asking strangers for money and being successful at it," Cherry explained.

He was working full-time and volunteered in the evenings after work and on the weekends.

Cherry ended up traveling to different parts of the country, and began to focus his community efforts on fair elections and democracy initiatives.



As a result of his efforts and work in New York, they asked him to lead the initiative. (Courtesy of Derek Beckwith)

The program is offered to kids aged 16 to 21. They learn how to write résumés, how to interview for a job, and learn public speaking.

Local business leaders in real estate, finance, architecture, accounting, and more run the workshops.

There's no grade point average requirement, and Cherry and the organization reach out to young kids that have often not been invited to other professional programs.

Cherry and his colleagues often go to the failing schools because they're trying to reach the young people who aren't given opportunities.

After students graduate from The Development School for Youth, they are all placed in paid internships for the summer.

While the financial reward is good, the real value is learning how to be confident and that they have the ability to be successful.

To date, Cherry and the All Stars Project has impacted over 10,000 people in Chicago. Donors have noticed the success, and have become more and more involved.

Cherry's mission is to help young people escape poverty and violence in the inner city, just like he did. His experience growing up greatly influences how he strives to accomplish it.



During the program, students are introduced to some of the most successful, caring professionals in Chicago. Cherry left. (Courtesy of Derek Beckwith)

In 1992, Cherry settled in Chicago, Illinois. He had been scheduled to go back to New York, but he fell in love with the city. He's been working there ever since.

He worked as a manager for mail, copy, and shipping services, and worked in a variety of other jobs. As a result of his experience with the All Stars Project, he often landed managerial positions.

In late 2006, Fulani and her colleague Gabrielle Kurlander contacted Cherry and told him they were interested in expanding the All Stars Project to Chicago.

He immediately said yes, and became the city leader for the organization in 2007.

For the past 11 years, Cherry has led the All Stars Project's efforts to combat poverty on Chicago's West and South sides, which are some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country.

"I saw myself absolutely in them," Cherry said of the people he reaches out to.

Cherry began by walking through these neighborhoods, stopping at transit stops and street corners to speak with young people and their families about the All Stars Project programs and workshops.

Cherry also tries to get young people and their parents involved by volunteering in their own communities.

One of the most valuable ways Cherry and the All Stars Project are able to help inner city youth is through their program called The Development School for Youth.



Cherry was learning how to lead, and engage with the community. Cherry (L). (Courtesy of Derek Beckwith)

"What we are doing is we're relating to poor people with dignity," Cherry explained. "And we're relating to poor people as having the capacity to grow and develop, and to grow and develop into leaders."