

Efrem Ayalew

Transforming Lives Into Something Better

Education and public service have always been a big part of my upbringing. I was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; a country where the culture took the Christian calling of “loving one’s neighbor as oneself” to the heart and public service was the very fabric of community bond. When I moved to America at the age of twelve, my father, who could not come with us, made sure to emphasize the importance of education and why we should do our best to escape the harsh troubles of life. Of course, like most young people, I did not understand why people made such a big deal out of education—yes, learning new stuff everyday seemed nice, but the bigger picture was missing in order to connect the smaller dots.

After transitioning to the States, I attended MacFarland Middle School in Washington, D.C. During my first few years, not being able to speak English and communicate with others was not the hardest part. Instead, the hardest part about moving to a different country for me was the immediate, but gradual cultural rift that was becoming more and more apparent. The war between the worlds: the one I had left behind and the new one I had yet to embrace. “To be or not to be” was the real question as Shakespeare eloquently asked in Hamlet. Should I be wearing my pants a little lower to seem cool, should I be wearing some Jordan shoes to school, and should I be a little disrespectful to the teachers as the others?

It is naturally easier to flow with the current of life than to swim against it. Hence, I tried to be something I was never meant to be. I tried to pull my pants down; no, in fact, I did not have to, I wore my older brother’s pants that were much

bigger than me and gave a somewhat legitimate reason for why my pants were saggy. I tried so hard to get a Jordan shoe and a member from Church finally got me my first and last pair, Air Jordan 19—all eyes seemed stuck on my shoes for those few short lived weeks, but the rush felt good while it lasted. However, similar to the “Tiger Mother” of Asia, I had a Lion Mother of Africa, who did not tolerate any mischievous behaviors even though she barely saw my four siblings and I after working all day.

While in high school, I was fortunate to join an Upward Bound Program through the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) in Washington, D.C., which literally helped me open my eyes to the possibilities of attaining a higher education. In addition, students like myself went on college tours and got a taste of college life by staying at the George Washington University Campus for three weeks and commuting for another three. Soon enough, I started to realize a college education was not only a dream, but also a reality I could strive for with the help of the various great mentors I had. Mentors who, similar to my high school teachers, were more than willing to revise my college statement essays, with all the grammatical errors of a broken English, and who masterfully built bonds I still cherish to this day, even though some of them are across the country or have unfortunately passed away recently.

During my last year of college, I wrote a research paper on the dropout rate and ensuing incarceration rates in America, which is particularly acute among minority subgroups. Therefore, soon after graduating from St. Mary’s College of Maryland, I decided to volunteer at the very first school I attended when I first came

to this country. Nevertheless, when I found out it was closed I continued volunteering at Roosevelt High School, where I attended my freshman year of high school. After assisting some AmeriCorps Members at the site, I felt the sense of inadequacy and frustration the students were feeling when suddenly being told to prepare for the SATs and apply for colleges, both of which they either did not know about until that point or did not develop the necessary mathematical and reading skills to comprehend some of the questions and write statement essays, let alone under a time pressure. I knew exactly how they felt because I had a similar experience during my junior and senior year of high school and it was not pleasant.

As a result, I have gradually worked my way down the age group of students I work with. I am currently volunteering as an AmeriCorps Member with middle school students via the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center, a branch of LAYC in Maryland, at Buck Lodge Middle School. I work with mostly *English as Second Language* (ESL) students in a seventh grade Math class who often seem to care more about not scratching their Jordan shoes than understanding the importance of learning math. And it is not always because they are just being lazy or careless, but because they simply do not understand how to navigate the complexities of life within the environment they find themselves in, which can be difficult even for adults and immigrant parents, let alone at such a volatile age when everything is being discovered or amplified and affecting them in unfavorable ways.

How do you help students overcome the fear and insecurity they have about a particular subject when they are being tested again before they had enough time to confidently demonstrate what they have learned instead of going through

another dreadful experience? What do you say to a girl who just came from South America and is a great student, but is gradually being influenced to find more value in her beauty than in her work ethics and personal integrity? What do you tell boy who shouts inappropriate things in class because a math teacher wrote triple x on the board? How do you tell students to be mindful of the lyrics they listen to when they memorize whole junks of rap music and disruptively sing in class without lumping an entire genre of music and dubbing it bad? These and many other questions abound, but lectures by other teachers and myself only go so far before the students start tuning out. As my favorite African Proverb states: "It takes a village to raise a child." And indeed, it does. All the social phenomena happening outside of the school walls inevitably filter into the school environment and the teacher or mentor is only one aspect of the equation in the process of guiding a precious child. A child who would otherwise be bound for something great if people from all areas of life, weather it is the people helping make the next big policy changes on the Hill or the janitors cleaning the halls of a local school, continue to work diligently with the best interest of the students at heart, even the troublesome kids because the ones who seem to deserve it the least are the ones who need it most.

Although I am the least of all to judge them, I certainly did not think life would take me around in a full circle in order for me to realize this vicious cycle is cultural and a current that continues to sweep millions of naive kids away. While they are developmentally immature, they are being exposed to content beyond their age and their capacity to cope with it in the absence of an interconnected

community. As a result, students are harboring a state of mind with far reaching consequences of not only eroding the value of family and community, but also of life itself. The various disciplinary actions taken at schools seem to address only the tip of the iceberg and in the process inadvertently exacerbates the problem further and a chain of negative identifications begin to bind the very same students who needed help the most. Hence, I sometimes try to give the students supplementary class presentations to make learning math more enjoyable and to help them see the bigger picture of life before they end up behind bars or with a broken dream and a crippled future with an innocent child in their arms. Presentations about people like Prof. Victor Rios, who went from being a high school dropout to an award-winning Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, simply because he had a teacher who truly believed in him and a few other people to push him along the way.

Sadly however, the appalling statistics do not lie and the stories do not seem to change. Arguably the best nation in the world where kids can realize their dreams has inadvertently or deliberately become the biggest oppressor of such youth. When as a whole society we consent to squandering millions of taxpayer dollars to incarcerate rather than to educate the same youth that would otherwise help reduce the national debt, we need more than an education reform. We need a community reformed by love: love that transcends racial and socioeconomic boundaries to change the hearts of policy makers, mentors, educators, and leaders of tomorrow. Simply because we live in a world where the at-risk youth of today are becoming a

threat to the livelihood of our own very kids and grandkids rather than being their friends or coworkers discovering something great.

As a result, the same vicious cycle continues to manifest itself in different forms without a clear remedy in sight for policy makers or a sense of hope for such youth. Youth who are only bound to pass on the same reality to their kids without a deeper understanding of the bigger picture because no one genuinely helped them connect the smaller dots and push them along the way. One generation comes and another generation goes to dust. Hence, the importance of igniting the curiosities of the young so they can pursue a world of dreams and hope rather than live out a life of fear and mediocrity remains the single most driving force for my passion, fueling my desire to pursue a career in teaching and youth development work. I believe once a soul catches fire it will take a lot to put it out, but it takes care, patience, and love to ignite one. In today's modern world, the wisdom of a remote village may not seem applicable, but an action of love is recognized by anyone, anywhere. When love is flowing from the very core of our being to our government, the kids will believe again and we will heal together as a community and as a whole world. In our parenting, teaching, and public policy, no matter what we do, to do it with love since public service and all of life is a transaction of love. When I look at life from the grand scheme of the universe, I no longer pessimistically say what we do here on this small planet does not matter anyway, I now know it does because of love and in all this, the only success story is being fortunate enough to be a part of the experience. The social and moral fabric of our society maybe deteriorating, but the values that kept communities intact for centuries amid great adversities will

continue to work today if our work stems from a place of love—because in the end, that is all that matters and the only force capable of transforming lives into something better.