

For most of my life, I had very little knowledge about public service and its power. I stand today, however, as a testament to the transformative nature of public service for both individuals and communities.

My circumstances growing up were to quote Langston Hughes, “no crystal stairs.” I am the proud son of Latino immigrants, neither of whom received a formal education past the eighth grade. Nonetheless, they provided for me and taught me more than they may ever be given credit for or even know. When I was very young, my parents separated and my father left us. Already living in tough circumstances, life became even more difficult. It was during this time I first came to the realization that “don’t let the bed bugs bite” can be an appropriate warning. I slept on the floor with my clothes in trash bags for many weeks trying to get rid of them.

Outside of my house, I was losing friends to gun violence and street-related incidents. The common anxieties of growing up and all of the challenging terrain young people must traverse felt magnified because of my circumstances. School became a challenge because of the obstacles I faced and after struggling an administrator told me, I would amount to nothing. I was expelled.

The school I transferred to was notorious for many reasons. My art classroom was littered with rat feces and I even saw a rat give birth. The lockers were boarded up and inaccessible and the walls were covered in graffiti. This environment caused a lack in my desire to go to school and I missed almost two entire years of school. Many poor decisions landed me in court, with a parole officer, and a 1.4 GPA. My life was not heading in the right direction, but a few important public servants and educators were the catalyst to help me turn it around and improve my circumstances.

It was during my senior year that the path I was on and my outlook on life took a turn for the better. Through the relationships I built in school, I began to see what was possible for me after high school. After a debate in my US Government class, an amazing teacher, Ms. Buchanan, gave me the nickname Senator Lacayo, which I then vowed to upgrade to President Lacayo. I became very close to the global studies coordinator, Mr. Hipkins, who invited me to many different events. I attended a My Brother's Keeper meeting at the White House, volunteered for Global Ties U.S. and even traveled to the U.S. State Department for a Discover Diplomacy event. Having these experiences, both in and outside of school, changed my perspective on what I could accomplish. I became extremely interested in careers where I could do what others had done for me.

Another administrator at my school, Ms. Boccardi, told me about the Leading Men Fellowship, a program run by The Literacy Lab. This program focuses on closing the achievement gap in early childhood education by recruiting and nurturing the talents of young men of color who are recent high school graduates. The young men are placed for an entire school year in a school in their neighborhood to support pre-K students with their early literacy and social and emotional development. All I knew about the program when I started was that I would be working with kids and being paid. Given my low GPA and lack of access to resources to fund my college education, I saw this opportunity as a positive option for myself. The program began in the summer with a week of rigorous training learning all about early childhood education. We learned about cortisol and its effects on learning for 3- and 4-year-olds. We learned a social-emotional based curriculum called SEEDS, and a plethora of intervention strategies such as transition songs that we would use to help our kids succeed in school. After the intense week of training and awkward singing amongst other young men of color, we were ready to go to our placement schools.

I was nervous the first time I walked into the elementary school; the classroom was far from what I expected. The children were all crying and a lot of them did not even want to talk to me. After many weeks of persistence, however, I built solid relationships with all of them. However, there is one child in particular who is a part of the program that stands out most in my mind. This child was “free spirited,” a term one of my colleagues uses when referring to children with challenging behavior. He would scratch, kick, bite, and do just about everything imaginable. He would tear papers off the wall and throw things across the room. One day, he even said he was going to kill me!

Despite his behavior, I sat next to him during lunch every day. I would engage in vibrant conversations about how “ain’t no” is not proper grammar, and how cockroaches and spiders look the same but I was pretty certain were not, and debates concerning which one of us was Spider-Man. One day while having lunch with him, he turned to me, mouth full of chicken, and said, “I love you, Mr. K.” I was surprised because he had threatened my life not long ago, and it made the impact I had much more apparent. I am now in my second year working with him, and he has shown immense growth, both academically and behaviorally. We still have the same conversations every day, but now he assures me he is Black Panther, so I get to be Spider-Man!

The Literacy Lab’s Leading Men Fellowship opened my eyes to the power of public service. Not only did I see growth in my students, but I also saw growth in myself. My lack of self-confidence was erased as I traveled across the city and even the country presenting about the importance of the work I do. My very first time on a plane was as an ambassador for quality education and young men across the country. I even had the pleasure of competing in and winning the Saul Zaentz Early Education Innovation Challenge at The Harvard School of Education. Many of the same obstacles I encountered as a youth persist in my neighborhood

and I see them with my students. Working at the elementary school in my neighborhood only intensified my determination to succeed and to give back.

I have enrolled in college at Trinity Washington University and began my classes this past Spring. I committed to a second year of service with The Literacy Lab through the organization's Americorps program. My income has also helped change my family's life. A once-empty living room where I slept on the floor now has furniture. I help buy groceries and can buy the cereal I longed for as a kid, which admittedly has excessively too much sugar. I have even had a short documentary of my service experience produced by Service Year Alliance and the pleasure of presenting to The Obama Foundation. It is as if my life has come full circle but this time around, I am in the driver's seat as a leader and public servant, giving back to my community the same way caring teachers and mentors did with me. My desire to serve has only grown because I have witnessed the immense impact that is possible. I have also seen the growth in my students and in my community. I intend to pursue a degree in political science and use my knowledge and growing network to continue to give back. Public service has changed my life and I am sure will only continue to provide me with opportunities to learn, develop new skills and discover my purpose.