

“DRIVEN TO SUCCEED....” | BOOK EXCERPT

A Special Tribute: To African-American Males’ Plight and
Feeling of Hopelessness... From an Early Age

“IF I Grow Up”

*“Train up a child in the way he should go and
when he is old, he will not depart from it.”*

– PROVERBS 22:6 (NIV)

“If I grow up.” That line has struck a chord with me since the day I heard it. From a young age, we are encouraged to think of what job we want to do when we grow up. What contribution do we wish to make to the world? We are asked that question before we even learn how to tie our shoelaces. I had asked that question countless times at Aunt Hattie’s Place, but on one summer evening, after eating a spaghetti dinner with my foster sons, I didn’t get the answer of historically respectable professions—a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer—that I normally had gotten in the past. The response was, *“If I grow up.”*

I looked at my foster son Lamont whose mother was on crack and whose father was murdered. Oh, my goodness. I could not believe what I just heard. To which I asked, curiously, “Did I hear you say, ‘If you grow up?’”

He matter-of-factly replied, “Yes, because kids around my way don’t git to grow up and be somebody.”

“You don’t think you’ll grow up?” I asked, baffled. He looked at me and began his story. His father was a high school dropout and sold drugs to support the family. And his mother had been on crack as far as he could remember. The reason he was placed in foster care was

because his grandmother, the woman who had taken on the challenges of raising him, became senile and was placed in a nursing home. Lamont admitted to selling drugs and was hoping to get caught so that he could go to jail. There, he would get what he called “three hots and a cot.”

I looked at him and asked, “What do three hots and a cot mean?” Another one of my foster sons answered before Lamont could. “Aunt Hattie, it means three hot meals and a place to sleep in jail.”

Now I was speechless. When my mind could finally process the things, they were telling me, I said, “You mean you want to go to jail?” “Yes.” They said, if it were not for Aunt Hattie’s Place, they would be homeless. In jail, at least they would have a place to lay their head and something to eat.

One of my foster sons named Isaac added, “It’s better than being homeless, shot by the police, or shot by drug dealers.”

I became upset with them for thinking like that. I said, “If you go to jail, you’ll get a record. Then you can’t go to college because you can’t get financial aid.”

They told me that they felt the police were their enemy instead of Mr. Friendly. I was surprised to learn that many of them feel that they cannot take a legitimate life. For some reason, they feel that the policemen are out to get them. I’ve heard many of my foster sons say, “Why try? I might as well live bad and steal a car, so I’ll have a bed to sleep in and something to eat.”

When these kids go to jail, I personally do not see social workers trying to change the system to keep them from entering the prison system.

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Being positively influenced by my stepmother and elementary school teacher, Mrs. Brown, and after living what I call a slave-labor existence with Aunt Sadie, I prompted myself to articulate a purpose for my life. But, I am one of the lucky ones. Many black kids feel defeated. Look at what has transpired in Ferguson. The police are not looked at as Mr. Friendly, by our many black citizens, but as Mr. Enemy. Our black men have this “it’s us against them” mentality.

It's difficult to disagree with them, or show them other instances to the contrary, when statistics proves otherwise and when one sees unarmed black teenagers being gunned down in the street by police and a black man like Eric Gardner, accused of selling loose cigarettes, suddenly held in a chokehold, telling the police, "I can't breathe," yet he is still choked, head pressed down into the concrete. But, by the same token, when black men react by cursing and disobeying police, the police will act with force.

I tell my foster sons all the time that you must look the part to be respected. The police officers are already scared and may react by using their weapons. We must educate our kids, or it will be the police who take a different approach when dealing with black youth.

Why does it take highly publicized tragedies for people to take a stand? We do not take a stand when it is black on black crime. In fact, I believe that we should take more of a stand. Economically, we must save all our children, especially the African-American male. They are the most feared, most hated most endangered and most targeted group than any other race or any other culture.

I personally believe that if any other race or culture had as many of their people in prison, on probation or parole, as there are in the African-American race, that it would be a crisis in that race or culture community.



In all my years of teaching and helping young African-American males, I have also learned that they are the most intelligent, witty, and inventive survivors, anytime they can maneuver the system the way they do to survive. Still, they are like a hamster on a wheel. Many are stuck, not able to get anywhere in life due to being mislabeled, undereducated, unloved, and having no available and consistent mentors.

[The Solution: \[Read my Blueprint for The Solution and Systemic Change in my "DRIVEN TO SUCCEED..." book\]](#)

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AS A “CALL TO ACTION” TO THE STATEMENT, “IF I GROW UP”

1. What would be some of your recommendations to make systemic changes for Black youths, especially Black males?

2. What does “three Hots and a Cot” mean.

3. What is the overall outlook of most Black males approaching their adolescence years?

4. What are the statistics of Black foster youth once they age out of and exit the foster-care system?

5. While waiting for systemic change to take place in society, what are some ways you can make a difference and help Black youth NOW?

COMMENTS: _____
