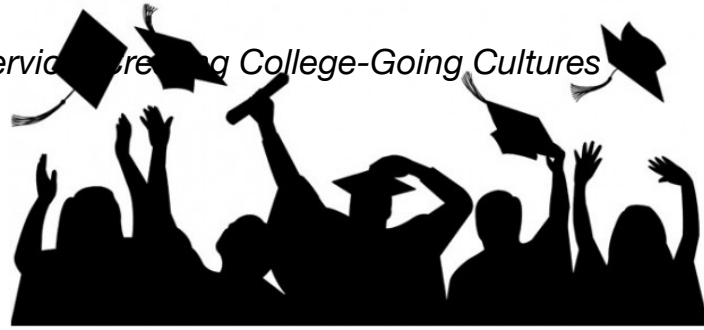


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A Q&A with Youth Advocate and President of Teaching Teens To Think (4T) Kayode Bentley

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(http://www.sponsoringyoungpeople.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/KBentley_DeskProfile.jpg) In many respects, **Kayode Bentley's** passion for providing young people with great examples of success, high achievement and entrepreneurial know-how was cultivated at a relatively young age, a byproduct of the scarcity he witnessed growing up in his South Bronx neighborhood.

“There were no professional mentors nor role models I could look to for career guidance, and my high school guidance counselor was of no help,” says Bentley, the President of **Teaching Teens to Think** (<http://www.4ts.org/>), or 4T Productions. “It wasn’t until my senior year in high school, when faced with the fact that I might get left back and not graduate with my class, that I started to take my education very seriously.”

Now, through 4T’s outreach, Bentley, who has worked for such noted companies as **Bloomberg LP** and has mentored students through organizations like the **Abyssinian Development Corporation** (<https://www.adcorp.org/>) and **iMentor** (<http://www.imentor.org>), hopes to help other young people avoid similar pitfalls.

His organization’s mission is to “inspire students and youth to THINK and PLAN for their future by completing their education, establishing a career and ultimately starting a business,” he says. “I really relate to youth and the inner-city communities from which they derive from.”

“I am acutely familiar with the challenges they face in their neighborhoods and schools and how they are viewed when entering the workforce,” he adds.

We spoke with him about how he came to his community work, what he sees as some of the barriers facing young black men, and what parents and guardians can do to inspire their young people to find their true career passions.

Kayode, the class is yours...

Q. At Teaching Teens To Think, or 4T, your stated mission is to “turn below-average students and youth into above-average students and youth.” Now as someone who used to be a youth, as well as someone who has taught and worked with youth, I know that’s not always easy. But why do you believe it’s so important to set such a bold and ambitious objective right out the gate?

A. To be honest, I never gave it any thought. I never really looked at this as being such a bold and ambitious objective. To me, it was as simple as this is what I believe, am passionate about and called to do. As the saying goes (and I'm paraphrasing): "You never work a day in your life if you're doing what you love."

Q. Can you talk a bit about your personal story and how you yourself came to be so intimately enmeshed in this work? I know in your "day job" your training seems to be in business and information technology, so how did working with young people become so inextricably linked to who you are?

A. Well my story is the same as a lot of inner-city youth, past and present. I was born and raised in the South Bronx in a single-parent home. There were no professional mentors nor role models I could look to for career guidance and my high school guidance counselor was of no help. It wasn't until my senior year in high school, when faced with the fact that I might get left back and not graduate with my class, that I started to take my education very seriously. At that point, I started to apply myself and graduated salutatorian of my class, thus realizing my potential. After graduation, I continued to build on that momentum, resulting in a successful career and, now, a growing organization.

A few years later, I started noticing a disturbing trend among my peers: the "saggin" pants, "baggy" shirts/jerseys and the overall lack of self-respect, professionalism and sense of self-worth. This inspired me to start 4T's Productions—Teaching Teens To Think—an organization that inspires students and youth to THINK and PLAN for their future by completing their education, establishing a career and ultimately starting a business.

Working with young people, and those from the inner-city in particular, became so inextricably linked to who I am, to put it simply. I really relate to youth and the inner-city communities from which they derive from. I am acutely familiar with the challenges they face in their neighborhoods and schools and how they are viewed

when entering the workforce. Since I've been blessed to be able to succeed, I felt lead to give back to the community by sharing with them my experience, knowledge and tools that can help them succeed as well.

Q. One of the really wonderful things I see that you do at 4T is that you host a "Meet the Professionals" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RflbiXD4M-g>) panel discussion (see below.) How indivisible do you think the lack of enough strong, positive role models in our communities for our young people is from the issues we see crop up most often as parents, educators and counselors trying to keep our students on the path to college and career success?

A. I believe it's absolutely necessary to build a solid foundation first, then address the indivisible lack in our communities second. To clarify, I feel we must first form robust resource groups designed to help guide youth. Then build on the groups' foundation and momentum in order to establish an indivisible network (i.e. community) of committed, strong, positive role models to combat the issues that crop up specifically designed to keep our students off the college and career path to success.



(http://www.sponsoringyoungpeople.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/4Ts-Pres_ADC.jpg) **Q. There's an ongoing debate about what "ails" the next generation—and particularly what ails young black men in particular, quite frankly. As someone who is both an African American male and someone who has committed a fairly sizable portion of his time to mentoring, speaking to and working with young African American men, I would love your thoughts on some of the personal as well as systemic barriers still holding more of our young black men from thriving academically.**

A. The reality is that the personal and systemic barriers still holding many young black men back from thriving academically are too numerous to name, so I'll have to limit my answer to what I believe are the main barriers for the sake of brevity.

The primary personal barrier, in my opinion, is the lack of positive professional role models within the residences, businesses or programs in the communities in which these young black men live.

On the other hand, the main systemic barrier is the lack of educators (i.e. teachers, administrators, etc.) able and willing to some extent to personally invest in them. There are of course educators who do try and are willing to make the investment but who don't have the support of the broader education system due to a lack of and/or maldistribution of funds and resources.

Q. If you had to speak directly to the parent or guardian of a young person who may need a little bit of extra help—or perhaps even just a bit of encouragement—right now, what would you say to him or her? Also, how would they get in touch with you or your organization to access some of the services and/or resources you offer?

A. I would suggest for a parent or guardian to stop and observe what their child really likes as well as does on a regular basis. This is the first clue/hint/indication to their child's passion. Once they (the parent/guardian) have discovered this, further develop their child's passion by aligning it with a trade, profession and/or career path that further develops that particular skill set.

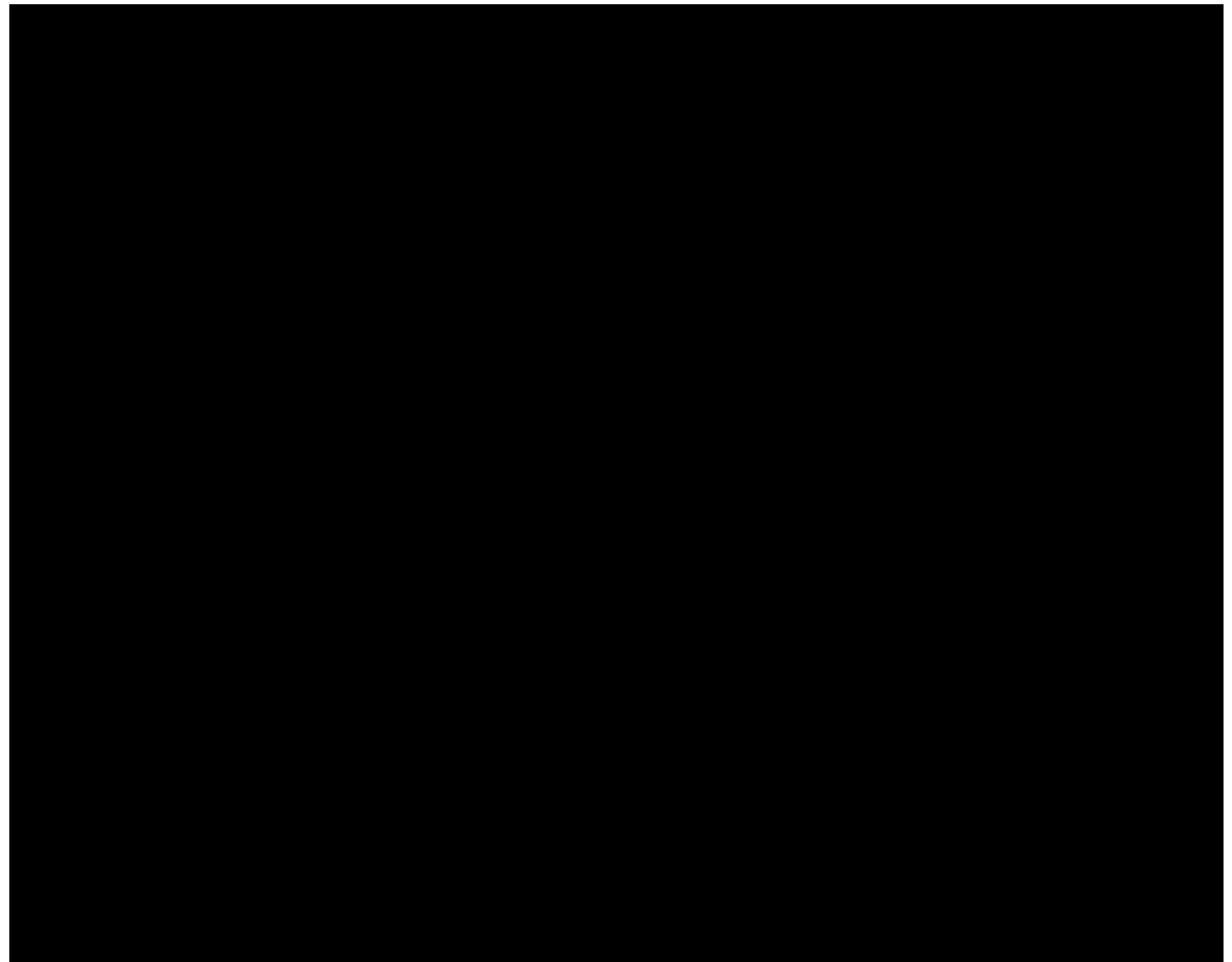
For example, when asked "What do you want to do or be when you grow up?" the typical response might be "a doctor" or "a fireman," etc. If you notice that your child spends most of their time playing video games on Xbox or PlayStation and not reading books having to do with medicine or chemistry, then they obviously don't want to be a doctor or fireman. In this case, start paying attention to the games that they are playing. I'm not saying to support them not doing their homework or pursuing their education. Instead, I suggest effectively channeling their energy by engaging them, finding out what interests them and what they are really into. What type of games do they play on Xbox or PlayStation? Are they mostly sports games, war games, etc.? If it's sports, then review their report card. Are they getting high marks in math? If so, then talk to them about the various professional careers in the sports industry, such as financial planning. Most athletes hire financial planners to help them manage their money.

In this way you're then helping your child combine their passion for sports with their skills in math. Once you're able to reach this point you'll then be in position to relate to your child's passion in a way that will actually benefit them in the future. With your help, they will begin to see how education can benefit them in the long-term, thereby inspiring them to complete their education now. From there, you can help them select colleges (or trade schools) that offer degrees that

align with their interests. The chances of them completing their college education drastically improves because they now have a connection to what they are studying and therefore have more of an incentive to graduate.

From this point on it gets easier for them. By getting a job in a field that they're passionate about, there's a greater possibility that job might lead to a promotion or other forms of advancement.

Also, I can be reached via 4T's website at **www.4ts.org** (<http://www.4ts.org>) using the Contact 4T'S page, by phone at 212-521-4132 or e-mail at **kbentley@4ts.org**. (<mailto:kbentley@4ts.org>)



a/) on February 22, 2014 [<http://www.sponsoringyoungpeople.org/a-q-and-a-with-kayo-de-bentley/>].
