

THERE'S THE RUB

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(Chapter Twelve)

Imagine being born in a country struggling with poverty, government corruption, health problems, and deteriorating environmental quality. Imagine your good fortune when your family decides to move from the Haiti to the United States in order to provide a better future for you and your siblings.

My next individual did not have to imagine it. He lived it. Evans (or Boogie to everyone who knows him) was fortunate enough to avoid his country's unrest but not fortunate enough to overcome the chaos that plagues many inner city youth — drugs, violence and trying to fit in.

Boogie grew up with both his parents. The relationship with his dad was normal but his relationship with his mother was "excellent". "I'm a mammas boy", as he puts it. "I could talk to her about anything. We had [still have] a very special bond and that bond grew even more when I was about 9-10 years old when my father became physically and verbally abusive toward her." That led his parents to splitting up and ultimately left Boogie, the older of two boys, to take over the responsibility of being the man of the house. A role he did not handle very well.

That is a big role for anyone to step into, let alone a 12 year-old. Yet, he took on the role despite the turmoil going on in his life. With life at home now adding new pressures, life at school got even worse. "Being in school was tough," he said, "it was intimidating and I never felt like I fit in. I was very insecure about myself."

Little by little, things began to spiral out of control. With no father figure at home and no safe haven at school, he began to hang out on the streets more and more. The neighborhood he lived in was a great community but the places he started hanging out in weren't. He started to see other kids his age dressing nice and having fancy things. He wondered, "why can't I have those things?" It became a question that would tug at him with each passing day. He soon found a quick and easy way to make a buck selling marijuana. He eventually got arrested at age 12 for selling drugs but things didn't change.

One day he found himself sitting on the porch with one of his friends as they conspired to rob a local drug dealer. The robbery would later become the catalyst for his friend being shot and another losing his life. As a result of his friend being shot, Boogie; in retaliation, shot and killed one of the men associated with the shooting. Boogie was eventually tried and convicted of first-degree murder and placed in Walpole State Prison. There he met older men such as Jerry Funderberg, Billy Barnoski and Billy Royce: all doing life sentences, who took it upon themselves to offer advice and mentor Boogie. "Everybody was around them and their words carried weight", he explained. They had leadership qualities. Boogie may have been young and new to the prison system but he was smart and intuitive enough to recognize that he should listen and learn from those who have a better perspective on life regardless of the circumstances.

Some of the best advice they offered was that "friends are not who you think they are." Considering he was in prison for what he considers "loyalty to friendship" this advice resonated with him. Ultimately their advice gave him the confidence he needed to be "comfortable in my own skin" and not worry about "fitting in". He stopped hanging out with old friends and focused on self-reflection.

He would eventually become a leader to others as his mentors were to him. Mentoring younger men and facilitating programs became a way of life for him. One such program Boogie has had a dramatic impact on is Project Youth (as explained in chapter one). He has become somewhat of a folk hero to the students who come up to the program. An indicator of his impact can be seen when students who have not yet met him ask, "is Boogie going to be here for the program?" I want to say, "what about me" but I tell them "no", then sit back and enjoy their reaction when Boogie announces himself. The program has allowed him to make a difference in the lives of teens while utilizing the opportunity for a greater good. It has also helped him become a better speaker because as he puts it he was, "never comfortable speaking in front of groups".

Boogie is a perfect example of what Thurgood Marshall referred to when he defined what rehabilitation is, "the quest for self realization". That is what Boogie has pursued regardless of the fact he may never get out of prison. Which makes his "quest" that much more impactful because he did it for himself and not to impress someone else. And there's the rub most go through life trying to impress others but Boogie went on a "quest" to inspire others.

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