

INVISIBLE CHILDREN

"I would say that, well, obviously my high school didn't prepare me for college."
--Darryl Briggs, youth leader and college student

The third of five boys born in the Bronx to a single mother who dropped out of high school, Darryl Briggs was starting out with at least two strikes against him. Growing up poor, Black, and bright in the Bronx without guidance, by the time he got to high school he already felt completely ignored, almost invisible. Darryl's high-poverty high school was eight floors overflowing with 8,000 students and an obvious lack of resources: "There were easily 35 students to a classroom and there weren't even 35 desks in the classroom for the 35 students to sit in . . . there was one lab in the entire school." The physical conditions discouraged learning, but for Darryl, the worst part was the lack of one-on-one attention. His classes were uninteresting and way too easy. None of the teachers noticed his potential and need for academic challenges, or even noticed him at all. When he skipped class, no one asked why. When he started hanging out with the "wrong crowd," no one told him that wasn't a good idea.

When he was 15 Darryl ran away from home and got arrested and sentenced to two months in juvenile detention centers. When he tried to go back to high school, school officials said without guidance and support he couldn't come back. They suggested he get a G.E.D. Soon he was arrested again. The turning point for Darryl was getting involved as a community organizer, finding a mentor, and going through leadership training programs.

A friend introduced him to a community organizing group where Darryl met the person he now calls his lifetime mentor and found his calling making a positive difference for other young people. He became a youth program coordinator for a nonprofit organization, For a Better Bronx, focused on combating youth and environment disparities in the South Bronx, and discovered he wanted to get his G.E.D. and continue his education. Darryl recently graduated from Bronx Community College and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work at Lehman College. He chose social work because it offers an opportunity for him to continue making the one-on-one connections he missed so much. An alumnus and current national trainer for the Children's Defense Fund (CDF)'s Young Advocate Leadership Training (YALT) program, Darryl was a panelist at the Educational Testing Service-CDF's June symposium

in a session on "
Lived Experience

" which helped participants understand the struggles young Black males face and support they

Invisible children

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 04:05

need in the high school years. Darryl's ideas about what works come partly from his personal experience with what *didn't* work in the all-too-common schools like the one he dropped out of.

Darryl feels strongly that one caring adult can make all the difference. "That's what I was lacking as far as my high school experience and as far as my adolescence. I didn't have really anyone to guide me and say, hey, D, maybe you could take this route instead of this route, maybe you could make this decision instead of that decision, or maybe I could hold your hand while you do this instead of doing that."

Darryl appreciates that he's able to connect with and serve as an example for the young people he works with because they know he comes from the same place they do. But even when teachers don't automatically have that connection with their students, Darryl stressed the importance of teachers knowing something about the community their students come from and making the effort to establish some connections: "A sense of cultural competence needs to play a role. We have many teachers that come from different backgrounds." Something as simple as giving all staff a tour of the surrounding neighborhood can be a start: "Even those small little things, like, 'Okay, I bought cereal there,' you can use that to connect to your students, because they're like, 'All right. Well, my mom shops in said places [too].' So you've established that connection off of something you wouldn't even expect." Once again, it comes back to adults making personal connections with the children they serve.

Darryl's ultimate goal is to found a nonprofit serving young people in the juvenile justice system. He uses his own story for the young people he works with today to keep them in school and out of prison: "It sounds like a cliché, but never give up, because there are many different roads to achieve the same goal. So whichever venue you take, just never give up, and ultimately, be the best at whatever it is you do."

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.