



These are the words of an 18-year-old who recently graduated from high school in a high-poverty neighborhood in the nation's capital: "Where I live, which is Ward 7, everyone is the same . . . If you follow the crowd, you're going to end up dead or in jail because that's where most of them are. But if you're a leader and you make your own decisions, then you can set your path for life."

Mike Ruff had to make up his mind a while back that he was going to step up and become one of the leaders. That's [what he told participants at the recent symposium](#) "Black Male Teens: Moving to Success in the High School Years," sponsored by the Educational Testing Service and the Children's Defense Fund. Mike explained how he came to embrace standing out from the crowd by defying low expectations—and how he reached a key turning point when a mentor told him he *couldn't* succeed.

College and career planning wasn't a reality for the people he knew: "Ninety-five percent of the students are poor. We come from basically nothing, because our parents were in the same situations that we are." His father had dropped out of school in tenth grade, and when Mike started high school he seemed to be heading down a similar track: "Ninety percent of the school did the same thing I did—skipped class, left school, and no one seemed to try to find out what the problem was." His grade point average freshman year was a 2.5, and at the time his main ambition was to keep up a D average so he could graduate.

But then he met with Mr. Mungin, one of the adults he'd met through an enrichment program he'd enrolled in during middle school, who asked Mike how his plans for life after high school were coming. Mike told Mr. Mungin he'd started thinking about a career in hospitality management, and Mr. Mungin asked to see his grades: "So he looked at my transcript, just for that ninth grade year . . . saw my grades, D, D, B, D, D, A, and looked back up at me with the straightest face and said, 'You can't do it.' So that kind of hurt me, for a grown man telling me that I can't do something. So then I just got up, walked out, and [caught] the bus home."

With some uncaring and uninterested adults, that's exactly where the story would end. Mike

would have left discouraged from having a dream at all. But that wasn't Mike's story: "By the time I arrived home, there is Mr. Mungin already there. I was wondering, why is this man at my house after he told me that I can't do something?" Mike had been lucky enough to find a true mentor on a mission. As Mr. Mungin talked to Mike and his mother that day he was able to show Mike that of course he believed he *could* succeed, but he also knew the path Mike was on so far wasn't going to get him there. Mike took the message to heart. Other mentors stepped in along the way to support him. By eleventh grade Mike had brought his GPA up to a 3.0, and by twelfth grade, a 3.75.

Now Mike is attending Tuskegee University, a historically Black university in Alabama founded by Booker T. Washington and the alma mater of the brilliant scientist George Washington Carver and many other scholars and leaders, where he plans to double major in hospitality management and psychology. Mike knows that in his graduating class he is one of the lucky ones: "We started off in this twelfth grade with at least 300 students . . . but only 130 twelfth graders graduated."

Mr. Mungin helped Mike realize he needed to change, and every one of the other young Black male leaders on the panel—all college students and recent college graduates—agreed on the importance of the mentors in their lives. But what happens to the students who never know a Mr. Mungin? What will happen to the other students in Mike's high school class who didn't graduate at all or were content to get out with mostly Ds? Far too many young Black boys are only hearing the first part of the message—"You can't do it." We need supports in place to show them that they can choose a different path—and even if no one else they know has done it, they can decide to be the ones to step up and lead the way.

*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](http://www.childrensdefense.org).*