

Isaiah Campbell: Second chance with GED

Written by Sheila Regan, Twin Cities Daily Planet, Behind the Story
Wednesday, 22 January 2014 16:11



I met Isaiah Campbell in early December at a minimum wage rally in front of a McDonalds and Burger King in Northeast Minneapolis. Organized by Minnesotans for a Fair Economy and SEIU, the action called for an increase in minimum wage.

It was a bitterly cold day, one of those days where you dread leaving your house. I was running a behind that day because of the cold and got to the rally 20 minutes after it was supposed to start. Unfortunately, that meant I missed the speakers, one of whom was Campbell.

Luckily I was able to speak with him anyway, as the protesters hurried off to some place warm. Campbell struck me as someone with a lot of confidence — well spoken and with charisma. He's someone who is working his way toward more of a leadership role at SEIU. He's got plans for going to Hennepin Technical College and making advances in his career, but he wasn't always so focused.

Campbell attended the Girls and Boys High School in Brooklyn, New York, but dropped out after three years. "I spent a few years in New York partying," he said. He had a job at a beauty supply store and at Dunkin Donuts, and spent a lot of time dancing in clubs and getting into fights. "I was at a standstill," he said.

Realizing that he had to turn his life around, he moved out to Minnesota to live with his uncle, who had gone to Sioux Falls to play football and then migrated to the Twin Cities. Campbell moved in with his uncle, and got a job with a structural engineering firm, and made enough money to move his family to Minnesota too. He was concerned about his little brother following the same path of getting into trouble. "I didn't feel it was a good environment for them," he said. "So I flew them out here."

The job with his uncle was great, but when the economy crashed, Campbell was one of the first to be laid off. Things got pretty bad then.

"I had lost my job, lost my apartment. I was living out of my car," he said. He received help from a female friend, who gave him a place to stay and helped him get back on his feet. "I took a real hard look in the mirror," he said.

That was when he ended up working for various minimum wage jobs, such as at White Castle,

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and eventually as a school custodian, through a temp agency placement.

Working as a temp in the schools was okay, but Campbell soon realized that many of the schools require you to have a Boiler License in order to get full time work. So Campbell set out to obtain his GED.

He took classes at Eisenhower Elementary School in Hopkins, which has an Adult Education program, where he studied for a year a half. While he might have been able to pass the GED without spending so much time in class, Campbell said he wanted to prepare himself to do more schooling beyond the high school equivalency. "I prepared myself to sit in class and studied for a year and a half so when I took the next step it wouldn't be so overwhelming," he said.

After he received his GED, Campbell worked on getting his Boiler License, which he plans to test for in February.

Depending on what happens with a full time position he's hoping to get, Campbell has plans to eventually attend Hennepin Technical College to earn his HVAC degree.

Campbell still dances, but he does so in a more positive way than when he used to party and fight a lot. Now he's a member of the Real Believer's Faith Center, in North Minneapolis. "We have a real nice group of men in the church," he said. "With my talent, I've turned it over to the Lord. I can show these younger kids who like to dance some of my talent."

Every year, we hear the dismal percentages of students who graduate from high school in four years. In some districts, this number hovers around 50 percent. That number can be misleading, since if you include students who graduate in five years or six years, the number becomes much higher, and if you include students who obtain their GED, it's higher still.

Getting a GED may not be the same as graduating from high school, but for young people who have made mistakes or had to drop out of school, the GED provides them with a second chance.

Campbell strikes me as a strong example as to why the GED is so important. Yes, perhaps there could have been more support at his high school to keep him in high school in the first place, but because that didn't happen, he was able to turn his life around by going back to school and getting a fresh start with his GED. Campbell's story also shows how narrowly focusing on the four year graduation rate ignores the young people who ask for a second chance.