

Inspiring Our Youth – Michael Simpson Jr.

Welcome to the first of many Mentoring Our Future (MOF) blogs.

A quote I came up with gives insight into the importance I place on mentoring:

“Your accomplishments are meaningless unless you inspire someone younger than you to set personal goals higher than the ones you have achieved” – Corey Baker

I first met Michael and his sister Karina (who I will blog about in a future #MOF) in 2009 at the NSBE Region 6 Summer Camping Conference (SCC) in Pomona, CA. At that time Michael was 12 years old and inspired me (yes, he inspires me still!) with the first words he spoke to me. I was on a panel giving a talk about college and Michael approached me afterwards and said:

“... so what if you are working on a Master’s degree, I can do better!”

Karina then followed with similar remarks. I then responded with “Oh really...” and sat speechless. From a simple panel discussion Michael and Karina automatically set a bar for themselves higher than what I had achieved. What amazed me the most was the excitement on their faces and the sincerity of their voices. They truly believed in their statements. Many things could have been in place before this encounter. For instance, Karina and Michael’s parents (who I will also blog about later) are both very active in their children’s lives and education and may have already exposed them to graduate degrees. Even if this was the case, the fact that I may have reinforced or introduced a high level of achievement (what

I've previously referred to as "the bar") is remarkable. Currently, **Michael is in the 11th grade and has a 3.8 GPA** on a 4.0 scale, amazing, (round of applause please). Something that intrigues me, is the possibility that **Michael's high level of accomplishments can possibly be attributed to his chasing of "the bar"**. A bar that Michael has set for himself based off of what's been placed in his environment and people he has taken a liking to. Not saying that Michael has to grow up in the best environment (Michael is from Compton, CA by the way), but what in his environment peaks his interests.

This brings me to perception, or the differences in perception of our Black youth. Many people, as well as myself, believe: television, internet, and environment strongly influence our youth's perceptions and aspirations. My encounter with Michael and Karina made me think,

"Can I really influence perception? If so, can it be done by merely being present?"

Many think of mentoring is hanging out with a mentee or doing activities. I like to think these type of interactions are very important. A point I believe we miss is an underlining one; being present and being a positive role model has an impactful long-term effect on your mentees. This **long-term effect is changing the perception of our youth which assists in breaking the barriers of "stereotype threat"**.

Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group – (Steele and Aronson, 1995)

I learned about "stereotype threat" in a book called **Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do (Issues of Our Times)** by Claude M. Steele (a great read by the way!). By being present and exposing our youth to a different type of success, we can begin to introduce positive stereotypes. For

instance, growing up, friends of mine chose particular paths often because it was one their parents or older siblings were familiar with, or because their environment fostered it. **If we want our youth to be successful, we must show them what success looks like.** We must help our youth see themselves in us, and not themselves in the characters on television. Me, like my friends I mentioned earlier could have easily followed the path of my environment. While growing up, my Father was an alcoholic, and my Mother was on and off drugs. From 7th – 12th grade my brother and I lived with my Father. Many of my friends turned to drugs and gang banging. **I don't believe I had the hardest life growing up, but I definitely didn't have the easiest.** What if I could talk to **a young male/female who is going through a similar situation in their life?** What if I can just be present and **expose them directly to "the light at the end of the tunnel?"** What if we as **successful Black Graduates** can talk to our youth and have discussions about using **adversity to build better character and stronger people?** I believe we would break stereotypes, influence perception, and inspire our youth. This is what **Mentoring Our Future** is all about.

Disclaimer: This is a blog of my opinions, not facts to abide by. When it comes to mentoring, you should always take bits of information from multiple sources and use them to form your own opinion.