

# I Recommit and I Connect

**I** thank God for the many positive influences that I had as I came of age while growing up in the small town of Aiken, S.C. As a single mother, my mom raised six children (I was the youngest). I am grateful that many of my friends' fathers looked out for me and provided me with some manhood training, which my mother could not provide. These role models were there for me during my rebellious years, when I went as far as selling drugs in high school.

I thought foolishly, like many of today's young black males, that I had to "show off" in order to be respected by the boys and to be popular with the girls. But because of a solid foundation of extended family support, since the age of 19 I have committed myself to today's warriors. This commitment pays homage to my "fathers" and, hopefully, will keep some of our black males from becoming extinct. In my seven years of youth advocacy, I have reinforced positive behavior and consulted parents when their boys "got out of hand." Seeing the smile of a young brother enjoying his youthful years gives me the greatest sense of peace and joy.

On the other hand, in this commitment to our younger brothers I also have found a rugged cross to bear. Recently, a certain incident happened at my new job as health and physical education director for a local youth-oriented organization that has reshaped my destiny with today's youth. The ides of March was the date, and basketball was the occasion. "We got here as soon as we could, Mike. Is your team ready?" the coach of the other team, Malik [not his real name], asked.

"As ready as dey gwin' git," I responded jokingly to create an amiable aura for his players. Malik and I decided to referee the game to keep



By Mike Weaver, '91

the peace among the "young bloods."

Basketball for today's young black male has become a rite of passage into manhood. It is his manhood training—full of fast breaks, elbows and backtalk. Prematurely, I thought that the competition would finish without *casus belli*, but when the young men of my team lost the game 81-66, they lined up outside the gym preparing for battle.

Question: What does one get when tempers are flaring, everyone is yelling at each other and the special ingredient of girls watching the melee is added? Answer: A cocked Saturday Night Special. Everyone moved in every direction trying to remove themselves from danger—everyone, that is, but me. I decided I would come between one of my players wielding a .38 and his target. I found myself rapidly approaching the young man with the gun and then grabbing him as he lowered the gun to my midsection. At that point maybe I was determined not to see another young brother get his life snuffed out at the hands of another. Maybe I was tired of looking at gravemarkers of the young. Maybe, as I thought of those "fathers" who guided me through those difficult, rebellious years, as an elder viewing this "manhood training," I was not going to let this can-

didate complete this particular rite of passage. Although in retrospect it was a dangerous—perhaps foolish—move, I pushed the youth far enough away so that I could talk to him and tell him it was not worth the consequences.

Being so close to danger had its toll on me. I called a friend/mentor who helped me deal with the tribulation. He expounded on one of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays' quotes: "Whatever one touches, his aim should be to leave all that he touches better than he found it." In our conversation I found the solace that came from my "fathers" when things went asunder. I sat in my bed and thought of all the marvelous years that I have touched our youth. I reminisced over my personal formula that I use to connect with youths: the introduction, the icebreaker, the adamant stance, the follow-through, and the connection. At that point, I realized that I was still in the icebreaking stage with these youngbloods at my new job—I had not connected with them!

This situation has taught me the importance of why I must leave that which I touch "better than I found it." I must continue the struggle. My "fathers" did not give up on me. Our foreparents did not surrender to the abhorrent conditions of slavery. Our ancestors did not relent in advancing their civilization.

Brothers, are we going to succumb to societal ills and let our boys raise themselves? We must prove the statisticians wrong—our males will not become victims of racial genocide. We must be more than role models; we must be the positive influence willing to get in the trenches and spend time with these young warriors. I decided years ago that our survival journey begins with the first step. I pray that many of you will join me in this journey as I recommit and as I connect with today's youth.