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The Story Behind the Vision

A History of Struggle in Search of a Better Life

When I turned twenty-one, my parents finally told me about their journey and beginnings in the United States. My mom and her family fled communist Vietnam on a boat, where they had no promise of actually surviving the rough seas and pirates to make it to a refugee camp in Thailand. The fear of being raped then killed by pirates, or a small boat capsizing in the Gulf of Thailand did not deter my mom's family from their commitment to attaining a freedom to have a better life for their children, and future. My dad had a similar story, except that he had to fear being immediately killed. They both made it to the refugee camp in Thailand and as my dad got sponsored to go to Portland, Oregon, my mom went by boat to New Orleans, Louisiana with her family.

When my dad first got to the United States in 1980, his mission was to make enough money to move my mom from New Orleans to Portland so that they could get married. He had exactly ten cents to his name, and because he could not speak English, he worked janitorial jobs. He saved up every single check, and after two years of working, he was able to move my mom to Portland, in which they got married in November of 1982. My oldest brother was born in October 1983, middle brother was born in December 1987, and I was born in January of 1989. Throughout this time, my mom remained a stay at home mom, and my dad learned enough English to begin working at the Department of Human Services as his bilingualism in Vietnamese and English helped newly arrived Vietnamese immigrants to Portland. During this time up until my 1st birthday, our family, along with my dad's two younger brothers, lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Northeast Portland.

When I asked my parents why didn't they tell me or my brothers earlier, they told us that the history of the struggle they had to go through for us to have a better life does not matter. They would do anything for us to have a better life, and the fact that they almost died to come to our country was something they wanted to keep from us because we needed to focus on our education, and regardless of what they had to do for us to have a better life, the point of everything is that we are able to pursue that better life without distraction from the pain of their past. I've never forgotten their sacrifice, and didn't understand why they were so tough on me growing up until that point. I then understood why they raised me the way they did, and how important it was that I take the passion from their sacrifice and direct that towards making the world that I knew growing up, a better place.

I Am Because We Are

Growing up, I went to a primarily white elementary school, where I remember feeling alienated because of my skin color. White kids would always

make fun of the fact that I was Asian. My 3rd grade teacher, I vividly remember telling me that I could not speak Vietnamese at school. At that time, I just did what I was told, and I made as many friends as possible. In middle school, I went to a more diverse school, where I started meeting a lot of Black kids. I became friends with a lot of Black kids, and from then on I was infused into the Black community.

I went to a high school in Northeast Portland that was very diverse, with a 25% Black population, 25% Latino, 25% Asian, and 25% White or other. Here I began developing my relationships with my friends even further, and strengthened them into a true brotherhood. I remember going to all of their houses everyday after school, every weekend, in the summer, year round, for all the holidays, everything you could possibly think of. It was an odd position to be from the outside looking in, because out of this group of Black kids, you had this one random Asian kid, but from the inside out, it just felt like family. I didn't realize there was something inherently different about how society sees us until a friend and I went on a mission to apply for jobs at the mall. We had the exact same resume, and every same credential. He didn't get a single call back and I got at least one. I ended up landing my first job at Marks Gold Crown Hallmark. At that point, I was happy I got a job, but I knew there was something wrong with our system because my friend couldn't get a job regardless of his qualifications. I however, moved on and continued living the life of a regular high school student.

My Journey with Education

Academically I was an average student, I received B's and C's in class and an A every now and then. However, school for me was a place to come hang out with my friends and not necessarily a place to learn. , At our school this expectation seemed acceptable from teachers so I always thought to myself, why not? I remember my 12th grade English class where I did not read a single book. I could literally tell my teacher that I had to go work on a project in another class, and he would let me leave. However, I did have one teacher that played a huge role in changing my life trajectory.

The first teacher who told me I could go to college was my freshman English teacher, Mary Rodeback. She had the toughest class, hands down, at our school, and my freshman year was also her first year teaching at our school. Throughout high school, she was my mentor, and often times would tell me that she wishes I could be in her class when I told her of how little I was doing in other classes. She mentored me throughout high school. I remember that no one ever wanted to go to her classes because they were so difficult. What we didn't understand then was that what we viewed as difficult was really just a teacher challenging us to do our very best work and meet our own potential. She was more than just a "hard teacher" for I remember seeing her at sporting events always supporting her students. I would always go to her for advice about anything, and as senior year came around, she was the one who told me I needed to apply to colleges and every scholarship I could get my hands on. She believed in me and that belief propelled me to want to pursue college.

I spent every Monday night of the fall of my senior year working at a college center across the street from our school to apply to colleges and apply to receive scholarships. I attended night school to improve some of my grades, with the hopes of attaining a better grade point average. It was a commitment, but I had a drive in two different places that told me I had to go to college; my parents and my teacher at school. My friends noticed that I began doing something different besides hanging out with them after school and I began telling them about college. However, none of them really thought about taking time out to do so, and no one told them to, so I could only tell them not to go to the mall, or go home and play video games as much as I could. One of my friends however, saw the drive I had for what I was doing, and told himself that he would come with me every Monday night and do the same thing, he ended up being the only friend I had from high school who went to college with me.

When I got to college, I struggled. I felt like I was behind and added to that fact, everyone in college was white, except for me and a few friends who joined me in college. The population of people of color was miniscule. It was a difficult transition coming from a community where my entire community consisted of people of color to now being in a place where I was definitely a minority. There were two reasons that I stayed in college my freshman year, my two close friends that were there, and a program called the Office of Multicultural Academic Support (OMAS), whose mission was to keep students of color from low-income communities in college and ultimately to help them graduate.

Igniting Critical Consciousness

My OMAS writing teacher, for the first two terms of my freshman year in college, was the first person who really introduced me to social justice. I immediately was captivated by how powerful the information he was giving me was, even though I was extremely behind in writing, I loved attending his classes everyday. The way he posed questions about social justice made the 15 students of color in his class engaged 100% of the time. We engaged in critical conversations about race, identity, class, gender, and social equality. Everything he taught me about social injustice, I related back to my own life experiences. All my friends at home, my parents' journey to our country, and why it was that there were so many white people in college, and not an equal representation of people of color. This sparked my own passion for social justice, and is the moment when I loved learning. I ended up majoring in Political Science, in the hopes of becoming a lawyer to curb the incarceration rate for people of color and then later minoring in Ethnic Studies, which continued the conversations that my writing teacher had with us. I remember him always talking about the 3 years he spent teaching 5th graders in the Mississippi Delta, and how unjust the conditions they were going through was. He had a story, where he sent a field trip slip home and was sent back marked no. He didn't quite understand, as the child wanted to desperately go on the field trip, he went to the home of the child and asked the grandparent who was taking care of the child why she had marked "no", she said that she had marked "yes", and he then realized that she was illiterate and therefore couldn't understand what was being asked of her in

the field trip form. It was one of many eye opening experiences for my professor who at the time was an educator in the Mississippi Delta. Because of this professor, I became passionate about social justice issues, and he played a huge role in helping me stay in college and ultimately graduating from college.

Walking down the street in college one day my junior year, I saw these signs that gave these staggering statistics that were way too familiar to me, and below the sign it said, "Teach For America." I was immediately captivated, but when inquiring about the organization I found out that they were very selective, and often times choose people who had lots of leadership experience. Although I was very interested in the mission, and vision of what they were trying to accomplish, I never saw myself as a teacher, and the selectiveness of the program deterred me from even applying. I brushed Teach For America aside, until I got an email from a national recruiter who suggested I apply for a summer position where I would essentially be an intern for Teach For America's Los Angeles Institute. I put this application off until one week before the deadline, and decided, I'd rather try and fail, then not try at all. I ended up getting the position as an Operations Coordinator in the summer of 2010. During summer institute everyone kept asking me if I was planning on joining the corps, and I always responded that I really didn't know because I never saw myself as a teacher. In fact it would be probably the last thing I thought I could do. By the end of Institute, the overwhelming support from staff members, corps members, and alum alike, swayed me into applying, and successfully joining Teach For America in January of 2011.

My journey into becoming an educator: Education as a form of Liberation

When joining Teach For America, I asked myself, what if instead of helping people of color in the courtroom after they have committed an offense, what if I could prevent them from ever having to see a defense attorney? If I could practice my passion for social justice in the classroom, I would be able to offer students an alternative to what the streets had to offer. I would be a part of transforming not only lives of the kids I teach, but influencing families, and the community where I taught. I would be able to influence my students and advise them in every way possible in order to try and defeat the school to prison pipeline.

Joining Teach For America made me think back to all my friends who were still at home, struggling to find a job, trying to go back to school but being placed in remedial classes that had professors that could care less about what their future turned out to be. I knew then that the difference between me and my friends was that I had a number of people that believed in me and never allowed me to even think of coming up with an excuse. My parents were immigrants and the reality of living in Vietnam was much worse than anything they had experienced in the United States. There was no way I was going to be allowed to give up no matter how hard they would have to struggle; my parents believed education was the key to success. Whereas, my friends' parents had been through generations of racism and inequality where they were often made to believe that they were inferior and could

not access a higher education simply because of their race and economic background. Although they knew they had the option to go to college, college didn't offer an environment where their children could excel because there were so many people who continuously held their children to lower standards and expectations.

I believed that as a teacher, I would have the opportunity to teach, advocate for, and invest parents and every stakeholder into our students' education. I would advocate for me as I wish I would have for all of my friends back home who are in a sense, stuck in the city of Roses. I came from and experienced growing up within a low-income community; I experienced first hand the gunshots, the gang fights, the overt racism that was still alive and well within our society. I was then able to name the experiences I've been through in college through courses taught by some amazing professors who had the same passion for social justice. It was then that I began to believe that education was the driver for true success in the United States. Through offering students a critical education I could facilitate a path changing experience for students, families, and communities. I would do this in honor of the community that saw me grow and thrive. I would do this because I believed that this was a step in the path towards true justice.

I continued to be in contact with my freshman writing teacher through a strong mentoring relationship. When he found out that I was joining Teach For America, he had finally mentioned something to me that I had been wondering for so long. Mike Copperman was a Teach For America Mississippi Delta corps member, and had left the elementary school classroom to enter the college classroom on a mission to help change the statistic of how many students of color from low-income communities graduate from college. I was one of his students, who changed those statistics, and I am proud to say that I had a Teach For America corps member as a teacher; one who transformed my life course and instilled in me a belief that I could do the same for others.

A Vision Derived from the Story

The Reason we do what we do: Future Change Agents Today

Above all else, I believe that my scholars need to know why they go to school everyday, why they work so hard, why they need to make good choices, and why it's important that they never stop dreaming about what they want in their future. I make it a point to ensure that this gets communicated everyday, through everything that we do, so that they will always remember that even though a task at the current moment may feel as if it's tough to do, or if they face a challenge, that their reason for being there will always push them to persist and persevere through any challenges. Our class talks on a daily basis about how there aren't many Black kids that grow up in the community we live in that graduate from college. Society tells us a statistic about what is true about Black kids that live where we live. These statistics don't take into consideration all of the opportunities that have been kept from our community. These statistics do not show us the direct connection between

disillusion, oppression, injustice and access to opportunities. Therefore my students want to change the world in order to beat all of these odds. When my students graduate from college, the world will change because they will be the future change agents who will make it a better place. Although this might seem simplistic and idealistic it is the truth that my students and I have come to believe. I believe that exposing my students to the beauty of their own abilities, the vulgar disparities around them, and providing them the tools to unpack all of these will empower them to ultimately change the world we all live in. My students will know how tough it is for them to graduate from college but they will also know who they are and where they come from in order to continuously strengthen their belief and their drive to achieve greatness. In that sense, they always know why they are going to school everyday from 7:30am to 4:15pm, and why they work so hard inside and outside of school. This “Why” factor thus invests them in everything we do at school, and whenever there is a chance that comes up to remind ourselves, we never forget about the importance of changing the world that is around us, creating a mission and sparking a passion for becoming the future change agents of our world, TODAY.

How are WE going to get there?

For my 1st graders to be our future leaders today, they need to be strong in mind, body, and spirit. First, they will need to be strong in the mind, meaning cognitively my 1st graders will need to achieve at grade level. They will then need to rise above that achievement standard, so that the achievement gap will never be relevant ever again in their lives. My students will need to be strong in body, meaning that they physically make good decisions including but not limited to regular exercise, and healthy eating habits. Finally, my students will be strong in spirit through four values. They will *work hard*, and constantly strive to become better, seeing greatness as not an end goal, but one that they work their whole lives for. They will *be nice*, always seeking to help others in anyway that they can, and develop characteristic traits that value giving back in a reciprocal pattern of paying it forward. They will understand their knowledge as a power that they can use to help others, *staying strong* when they feel like things get tough, and *making good choices* when faced with difficult decisions.

My scholars will know when they have practiced our values of work hard, be nice, stay strong, and make good choices through eight great traits: grit, curiosity, gratitude, optimism, social intelligence, self-control, love, and zest. When they show grit, they are doing their best work and finishing what they started. When they are showing curiosity, they are interested in the things that surround them and ask questions about those things. When they show gratitude, they are thankful for the opportunities given to them. When they show optimism, they are expecting the best in their future. When they show social intelligence, they know when to do the right thing at the right time. When they show self-control, they control their body and emotions, even when they see other people who are not. When they show love, they make sure that they let people know that they care through appropriate forms of affection, and they always help a friend who may need it. When they show zest, they are participating with enthusiasm.

Particularly with zest, I really emphasize this trait with my scholars because at the end of the day, they are in 1st grade, they are 6 and 7 years old, and because they are in school for nearly 9 hours a day, learning should be the most exciting, and fun thing they will ever do throughout the day. I then, ensure that my classroom is a zesty place where students are excited, enthusiastic, and participating through infusing joy and weaving it through every part of the day where they develop a love for learning at a very early age. Through these character traits, my scholars will practice working hard, being nice, staying strong, and making good choices. They will be rewarded each month with a value award, daily with value stickers and character trait stickers, and the values and character traits will be communicated through a log that is sent home everyday to allow them the opportunity to share how they are practicing living out these characteristics outside of school as well. I am currently working with another teacher on implementing a lanyards program where scholars can earn character trait buttons at the end of the month to wear with a lanyard on Fridays with their college t-shirt.

What will it look like? Rising Above the Standard

When I think of “closing the achievement gap” for my students, I think of a closed gap, meaning my students will perform *at the least* at grade level. However, I want to reframe it in a sense where we do not think of closing the achievement gap anymore, but we think of how far above the closed achievement gap we can get them to be. We can think of it as how far they have *risen above the achievement standard*.

To end education inequity, so that we can stop framing it as “closing the achievement gap” and start framing it as *rising above the achievement standard*, it begins in 1st grade. If my 1st grader is leaving 1st grade reading, writing, and doing math at a 3rd grade standard, this child’s life trajectory has completely changed. They will constantly be seeing how far they can *rise above the achievement standard*, instead of continually fighting against the achievement gap. This is transformational; this is life changing, because at this level of achievement, they are becoming their own teachers, and teachers for their friends, family, and community. They are in a sense, becoming leaders in their own communities **now**, advocating for themselves and their peers immediately to create their own change that they seek.

My students will know that the reality of their circumstance will be rare, but it is more than possible, and they will seek to change this mindset that it is “rare” around by helping their friends and family believe through their own successes. They will not only advocate for themselves, their friends, families and communities, they will understand that the achievement gap in which they are fighting to rise above exists for far too many 1st graders just like them all across the United States, and the world. They will know that just like them, other students who may not be of the same race or ethnicity, is capable of rising above the achievement standard, just like they are, and are effected by the achievement gap in the same way that students just like them are. Ultimately, my students will rise above the achievement standard, become their own teachers who are not only advocating for their friends, families, and communities, but for students all over the world who are facing the same

circumstances. They will BE the change that they want to see. Who said 1st graders can't be our future leaders today? Because they will surely be the future change agents of tomorrow.

Building a Championship Team: Scholars, Families, and Community walking alongside the Teacher

Scholars

For my 1st graders to be our future leaders today, I need to invest 3 critical components in their education: 1) Themselves and their peers, 2) their families, and 3) their community. All of these different parts to their success as students and leaders in their communities directly correlate with each other and have such an equally important part to play. My students need to be first invested in themselves, and each other. They need to believe in their own capabilities to achieve at very high levels, and use that as a driving force for them everyday to work hard, be nice, stay strong, and make good choices. They will understand why they go to school everyday, that for a Black kid like them growing up in our community, its tough to graduate from college, and the statistics say that in a classroom of 28, only 1 of them will graduate from college. They will be empowered from knowing this information, and that invests and drives their passion to excel in school, and in life, to change the world. While doing so, their excellence will show their families what they are truly capable of doing, and thus invest their families not only in their education now, but also in their education for the rest of their lives. With the understanding of what their children are capable of achieving, their families will hold every teacher, every school that they attend for the rest of their lives to that high standard, which is exactly what they deserve.

Families

To begin these conversations with their families, I will hold families to high standards in keeping in constant communication with me in what I expect of them to do with their children at home, and how they are doing at school. To ensure of this communication, I will open up my phone line, e-mail, along with the communication log to all parents and families to use at anytime for whatever reason. I will share with all of my student's families my vision for their students this year, and emphasize with them the importance that we all work together in the name of their achievement. Families will know that their work at home is equally important to the work we do at school to ensure the success of their scholar, and will be invested in the work they do with their scholars at home from my own passion for why I am here: the achievement gap. As I share with them about the achievement gap, families will be empowered to embody the character traits and values with their child as well, to ensure their success in school, and in life as change agents of our world.

I want to also emphasize with families that the aspect that I am most excited about this year is building relationships with not only their children, but with them, to push their children to the highest level. I believe that the success to any mission is derived through the investment of the people involved by building amazing,

trustworthy relationships that are genuine and meaningful beyond the classroom. To further this relationship with parents and their children, I will express to all of my families that if their children participate in ANY extra-curricular activities outside of school to let me know when and where and I will be there to support them. I strongly believe in supporting my students in all that they do, and I want to be there to cheer them on in whatever they are doing outside of school. I will also let families know that if they wish to invite me over for a holiday, dinner, sporting event, or anything at their homes, that I would, pending any scheduling conflicts, come by and enjoy those events with them. I then move from being a teacher to their child, to a family member.

Community

My vision for investing the community is two-fold. First, I believe that for me to be able to invest the community, I must live in the community where those conversations can begin; in the community that I teach in. Second, I believe that I must proactively seek out anyone, and everyone in the community who can support my scholars in anyway that they can this school year. Their support can mean as little as knowing about the successes of my scholars, and creating a belief in them that the children in their community will be the ones who will change our world, and challenging them to ask themselves what can they do to help ensure these children have the pathway to success. The second part of my vision for my community however is made possible because I live in the community. Whenever I go out in the community to go grocery shopping, do laundry, or go get a haircut, I have these opportunities to invest the community in what the scholars in my classroom are doing.

Giving myself the opportunity to engage with the community allows me the ability to invest them into what we are trying to do in our classroom, and thus community members will share with other people how important it is that we are changing who we are to help cultivate our future, essentially those students who are in my class, as well as others who are not. The community is very important, without it, our scholars then continue to exit the classroom into a place where they are finding that history is persisting. Thus, if we can create a community environment where scholars feel equally supported to change the world, as they do at home, and at school, then they will be on a pathway to graduate from college, and change the world for the mere fact that they are changing a statistic about what the world says a Black kid like them, in South Central L.A. *should* be able to do.

Living in the community has one more additional factor on me as a teacher. I will be able to take the understandings of what it is like to live in the community and apply that to the teaching and instruction that I have in class. In this sense, I will be able to engage my students in a very real way in the things that we discuss. Whether it is music, community environment, or interests, living in the community will help me become a better teacher because I will better understand my students and what things interests them along with the experiences they bring to school everyday. Living in the community will also allow me to bring the story of a place that usually is not talked about to light. As much as I hear gunshots, helicopters, and arguments, as well as see drug deals, police racial profiling, and the poverty behind the street

signs, the community is the most beautiful place you will ever experience, because the people who make it up are the most beautiful people you will ever meet. For that very reason, I never forget why I do what I do.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

To step beyond academics and cognitive development for my students, my ultimate goal is to light a spark in them for a passion in social justice and their critical consciousness. I want my students to be advocates for their communities today, and I want them to grow up into advocates and activists for the social injustices that they are passionate about, particularly the very injustices that they and their families face every single day. I believe that there is a history that is kept from our children throughout grade school, and many of it is not accessible until they reach college. But this education, an education about their own and other oppressed people's history and experiences, is something that our kids need to be educated about if we want to ultimately get to the very education equity that we seek. Again, for them to be the future leaders today, they are reflections of what is possible for the next generations of kids who see my students as reflections of them.

To begin this spark for social justice, we will ensure there are culturally relevant and anti-biased texts for as many things we do in our curriculum as possible. Scholars will be empowered through knowledge about history, and the truth behind popular stories of our society and the people in it. They will learn about the struggles of Black people, and in an equal sense the successes of Black people. They will be not subject to inferiority to this information, but they will be empowered through this information where they know that they can make the world a better place.

The culturally relevant and anti-bias curriculum will not be a subject merely by itself, but it will be weaved into the curriculum, and be used at anytime in which it is applicable through all parts of the school day. We must include a critical conversation about social justice in Writing and Social Studies, but as well in Reading, Science, and Math to have a truly anti-bias curriculum that challenges our kids to critically think about what it means to be Black in the world that we live in. Ultimately, this will empower them as they grow up to further question everything that they are presented with, pushing them to and through college so that they can be the change that they seek through the knowledge of who they are, and the history behind their identity.

Inspiring my Scholars through my Identity

Growing up with Black people has given me the opportunity to better relate to my students through seeing my very own friends in them. When I have conversations with my students, the tone of voice that I use, and even my mannerisms and speech help not only my scholars, but also my families relate to me. They all know about my life, and where I come from and the passion behind what I do. Through the investment that I have with my students because of my identity, I do have an additional impact on them. They are very much so inspired by me continuing to chase my dreams and never letting anything stop me from what I've wanted to do. They know that if I can do anything I set my mind to, that they can do

this very same thing, because they see themselves in me, even though I do not share their racial identity.

They have met some of my friends who have come to visit, and have asked them questions about who they are and how they know me, and to their expectation, they see that my friends look just like them, and I came from a place where my friends are from, in which gives them aspiration to achieve anything that they dream, and nothing can stop them if they believe in themselves because nothing stopped me in achieving what I wanted. I tell them often times about how I always wanted to be a person who changes the world, and I am doing that by being a teacher. I wanted to be a professional breakdancer, and I now do half-time show for the Los Angeles Clippers. I always wanted to be a racecar driver, and through time, I was able to do so, and continue to practice at race tracks in California till this day. My dreams, and achieving them, coupled with my identity shared through my personality and character, has an additional impact on my kids to know that if Mr. Pham can make his dreams become a reality, I can too.

Bringing My Passion Outside of School, into School

When I first started teaching, one thing I've always told myself was that I would never give up dancing, no matter what. Dancing is so much apart of my soul, and it keeps me balanced in everything that I do. My dream was to be dancing and teaching at the same time, and even better yet, bringing dance to my school and starting a dance team where I can teach my kids how to breakdance and the importance behind expressing yourself through various forms. How feasible did I think this would happen? Not that much, but whatever the obstacle, I knew I wanted to do this at my school. When I was first hired at my school, my principal had asked me if there was anything I do outside of school that I could bring to school, specifically in providing something additional for our scholars. Immediately, I told him that I was a professional breakdancer. He then asked me if I would be willing to teach breakdancing for P.E. in my first year, and I responded with an enthusiastic, "YES!"

From that point on, in my first year I began teaching breakdancing for P.E. Then what started as something small like a P.E. course, turned into something much bigger, when me and a kindergarten teacher who taught step, put together a step and breakdancing team to compete to have a spot to perform at KIPP School Summit, a annual teacher development and retreat for all KIPP stakeholders. After we had made the cut, we went through a whole year of work doing shows, raising money, and ultimately performing in Orlando, FL at the 2012 KIPP School Summit in front of 3,000+ and former president Bill Clinton (we actually went on right after his keynote speech). With that being said, I was able to accomplish what I had set out for myself in bringing something I was passionate about to my school, and share something with my kids that normally they don't have access to as most of the dance studios Los Angeles are located in North Hollywood.

This year, we have decided to expand the team to 50 students to allow more access to the one and only extra-curricular activity we have available for students at school. For them, our team, StepUP---BreakDOWN, is not about the fact that they are great at dancing, but the fact that it is a platform for them to show the world what is

possible. I believe that the dance team is an extension to my classroom, as well as other classrooms at our school, and it is a testament to what our children can achieve given the right resources, love, and supporters around them. The team then will perform on many different stages, but the reason behind why they do it is not actually to be good steppers or breakdancers, but to showcase to the world the amazing talent they have when we give them the right structure to thrive under. They learn how to work as a team, and every success we have on the team is taken from the things we learn in the classroom, further instilling in them the mission of why we are here and how we will change the world.

The Mission Statement

My scholars will know why they go to school, how they will achieve that why, and what it will look like once they achieve it. The “why” will be tied to a spark for social justice, the “how” will be tied to their character development, and the “what” will be tied to their Big Goals. They will understand the importance of why they are here, and then work from there to knowing how they can get themselves their “why,” and “what” it will look like once they get close to their “why.” Currently, my scholars’ reason for being at school is so that they will graduate from college and change the world. They have the conviction that them graduating from college will change the world because the statistics for Black people who are from their community graduating from college is low. For them then, they are trying to ensure that they change the world through making sure they graduate from college and pursue whatever it is that they want to be when they grow up. How they will attain their why is to work hard, be nice, stay strong, make good choices and embody the Great 8 Traits: optimism, self-control, grit, social intelligence, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity. What it will look like for them is outlined in my “Big Goals” document.

A Vision for my Future from my Past and Present

I love what I do, and wake up everyday excited about getting to school to see those kids in front of my door waiting for it to open. However, everyday, as our school shares space with a traditional public school, I am reminded of how many children are still not receiving the greatest educational experience that they deserve, and at the same time it is infuriating, I am greatly saddened. I know that very well, any of those students at the other school, who has at 14% proficiency rate in 3rd grade as of September 2011, could potentially be students at our school. I do want to continue teaching beyond my commitment, at least for a 5th year, or until I know it is time to leave the classroom. However, when I do leave the classroom, I want to take everything I learned and experienced from the classroom and in the community in advocating for kids at a larger scale, where I can take those successes and implement policies and legislation that will give more kids access to a great education.

Ultimately, I want to use my experience as a teacher as the foundation for a lifelong journey in ensuring that our country is restored to prosperity and greatness through social justice and a better understanding and communication with each

other through the lens of the realities of each corner of our United States. I believe in the document that our founding fathers created at the inception of our country, and I believe it is our duty to ensure that we are practicing, as citizens and those who believe in our freedom as a country, our right to voice our concerns and take action when we feel our basic pursuit of happiness is hindered. We can be great, and we can create the world where our children, and their children will be able to live and experience the beauty of life without having to take upon the generations of struggle that their ancestors and families had to before them. My belief is that we can be great, we can be amazing, we can be awesome, but we must do it together and help each other realize those things within ourselves.