

BREAKING CYCLE

By Emmanuel Blango

I have two daughters. My oldest daughter, Makayla, is 18 and I am in contact with her on a regular basis. My 17 year old daughter, Monaysha and I haven't seen each other in almost 10 years. Her mother and I have had our differences, but despite those differences I have been reaching out to Monaysha with birthday cards, letters, pictures and financial support. I have tried to maintain a relationship with her despite the obstacles in my way. Needless to say, it hasn't been easy.

However, my relationship with Makayla has reaped abundant rewards. She has allowed me to experience the tremendous gift of being a parent. Despite my current situation (having been incarcerated for 16 of her 18 years) she has gifted me with access to her life. Although she suffered with depression and self-esteem issues, she has been a high honors student her whole life. Through the Grace of God, she survived suicide attempts, never got pregnant and was never in trouble with the law. In her Junior year of high school, she decided to run for Student Representative for the New Haven district. There was an election including students from all of the New Haven public schools for the position. During a phone conversation she said, "Dad, I think that I would make a good student rep, but I don't think I'll win because there are over 100 students running". She felt the other students were more polished than she was. They came from two parent households and she felt their pedigree would lend itself better than her background for the position. During that call I reminded her why her dad was her biggest fan. I told her she was as good or better than the other students. Not only did she get high honors, but she was involved in the same clubs and after school activities as the other kids. Because of her economic situation and the fact that she had to babysit her 7 and 8 year old brothers after school, she didn't have the time or access to certain things that other students had, yet there were other things she had to offer that the other students didn't have.

Makayla's mother died from a seizure when Makayla was 14. The way in which this young girl overcame the pressures following her mother's death is inspiring. I encouraged her to use the obstacles as stepping stones. I told her to use her pain as currency and make it count. She went on to win debate after debate until that pool of students dwindled down to the top three. Guess who was one of the three, my baby girl, top three!

In her final debate describing why she would be the best fit for Student Representative, a position where she would sit on the Board of Education representing over 18,000 students and earn a seat at the Mayor's table each month as a delegate for New Haven representing student's needs, I suggested she tell everyone that she had a parent who was incarcerated. I wanted them to know what she overcame. Because she's so intelligent and "polished" many people may have assumed that her accomplishments came easy to her. She was hesitant to reveal her personal life for fear of being pitied. She just wanted to be judged on her merits and I respected that. But I encouraged her and told her this was much bigger than herself. There are over 18,000 students in New Haven and Makayla isn't the only one with an incarcerated parent.

Others also grew up in a single parent household whom she lost when she was only 14. I told her she should share this to inspire other students who may have experienced similar or worse situations and were looking for support. "Who better to represent your city and your peers than you, sweetheart", I asked.

My baby won that position and the following year won a State Student Representative spot on the Board of Education joining two other students as representatives on Governor Malloy's team. She was honored with a full ride to UCONN and is doing very well as a freshman.

My daughter has broken and continues to break the cycle and has inspired me to take my life and recovery seriously. I want to impress my daughter. I want to give her a dad she can be proud of. The greatest things she ever said to me was, "Dad, if you never had that conversation with me, I would never have done this" and "Dad, I understand now what you were saying about boys because I had this boy who did the same exact thing you said and I was able to avoid..."

My daughter credited her strength and growth to me, a dad incarcerated. Of course, I can't receive that, but the point is she believes it! And that is humbling and sobering at the same time because it took me being incarcerated to take a serious look at myself and work at being a better me. I believe that God has rewarded me because there were many days when I felt like giving up, but it seems like my daughter's growth was proportionate to mine.

So all of the things I valued as a parent in the world like money to buy my daughter nice things, none of that mattered. What Makalya remembered was my wisdom, my character, my advice, my presence (limited though it was), the experiences I overcame and shared with her and the fact that I remained consistent in her life.

Breaking the cycle starts with self. You never know who you will touch in your life or how something you do or say will send someone's life in another direction all because of the things you learned and applied to your own life.