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First North American Serial Rights
Approximately 1,050 words
Non-fiction

THE POWER IN THE PHRASE:

I BELIEVE IN YOU

by

Dortell Williams

Ultimately, the decision was hers to make. Cal State L.A.'s Taffany Lim, of the Center for Engagement, Service and the Public Good, could seek funding for our program or not. A decision to fund a cohort of men for a Bachelor's degree program in Communication Studies -- who were serving an eternal sentence -- would not only be atypical, but in some circles, taboo. After reading our informal academic papers on a remote visit to listen to our stories, Dr. Lim was all in. Her humanizing affirmation of our worth was declared in one simple but life-altering phrase: "I believe in you!"

Dr. Lim's confidence in us was in stark contrast to our life experience in society. For the majority of us, the abandonment by our fathers was a signal that we were unworthy, and neglect by our mothers (whether real or imagined) was perceived as being unlovable. Then there was the inattention of teachers who couldn't find the time to mentor us as we fell woefully behind. Their inattention communicated to us a personal level of deficiency we

embodied.

Thanks to studies on adverse childhood experiences, we now understand that many kids who suffer from various traumas during their youth are distracted by those experiences, making learning more challenging. All too often this tragic trajectory begins at home in the form of mental and physical abuse, divorce or homelessness. It then traverses through the classroom, and directly into the prison system. The sad thing is, 40 years after my time, the history of neglect of inner city youth continues, graduating far too many of us from school to prison. The warning signs were there in my day, and they are even more evident today.

Personally, I felt inadequate as I struggled in math and reading. As the other kids openly blurted out answers to questions asked, or boldly went up to the chalk board, I felt overwhelmed at the mere prospect of being called upon. I seldom was. In retrospect, the inattention I received from my teachers was a form of silent collusion with my insecurity. I didn't want to be bothered, and they didn't want to bother with me. Yet I passed every class, in spite of my failings. I had written myself off as stupid, and apparently my teachers had written me off as well.

By the age of 18, just before graduating by the skin on my teeth, I asked my high school counselor what my prospects for college were. He told me that I wasn't college material. That's when I gave up on myself. I then made the ill-fated decision to immerse myself in the illegal parallel economy of drug dealing. My life and perspective spiraled from there.

Now at age 56, with 32 years into a sentence of life without the possibility of parole, I am certain I am not stupid. I know this because, ironically, it was in prison where I earned high honors during a

correspondence paralegal course. That success gave me the confidence to enroll in junior college. To my surprise, I made it to the Dean's list at Coastline Community College. I earned four associate of arts degrees there, before launching to Cal State LA's Prison BA Prison Program. It was there, at age 55, that I earned Summa Cum Laude with a 3.93 GPA. Stupid people do not consistently earn such marks. The potential was always there, even before I was labeled incorrigible and sentenced to LWOP. Yet it was the adults in my life whose refusal to believe in me inspired my own self-doubt.

Before Dr. Lim, there was Ms. Townsend, a teacher at the state prison in Calipatria, located southwest of Imperial Valley. While she never verbalized the words, "I believe in you," her mentorship and irrefutable belief in me was contagious. It was her attention that gave me the confidence to take that paralegal course, which was the catalyst to my BA.

After over a decade of teaching cognitive behavioral therapy classes to my peers, I came to understand the reasons why we go astray. I've seen the overlap in my peers' narratives: the most common causative factor invoked by my peers are absentee parents. And while my dad was there physically, the distraction of addiction made him completely impotent in paternal leadership. Add to that the stress of single motherhood, where mothers work 16-plus hours a day, out of love, not intentional neglect, that results in a perception by their children of abandonment so stark, so hurtful, that they run to gangs for the sense of "family" they so desperately long for at home.

This is usually where the police get involved, and where interactions can be negative or positive. For me, those unique opportunities for law enforcement to offer guidance, mentorship or encouragement usually ended with threats of arrest and ominous forecasts that I would end up self-fulfilling. My

intimacy with the police amounted to frequent "stops and frisks," and became a game of "catch me if you can," which reinforced my distrust of law enforcement. I was never referred to the YMCA, nor were my parents sent an advisement to enroll me in an after school program. But then again, that's an ideal, not reality. Instead, I was always told what a failure I was; how criminal I was, and how my life would end. The question is, if I had been guided, would I have listened?

Today, life experience has taught me never to discount those I'm incarcerated with -- or anyone for that matter. We all have inherent potential. I've learned much during this journey, and after accumulating over 800 hours in peer-to-peer instruction, I can confidently share my most powerful lesson: that words are powerful. The simple phrase, "I believe in you" is a phrase that can upturn the despondent and forlorn. I now pay it forward, mentoring others to help them further their education, to get them published, and guide them toward successful parole hearings to freedom.

I may never see the light of day, but I'm going to do everything in my power to break this cycle in order to help others live out the innate potential they were born with. All it takes is a little belief; a little belief expressed by a simple phrase, "I believe in you."