

Tyrell M. Holcomb

Power Autobiography

Power is one's ability to get things done or influence something to be done. This should not matter based on your economic status, neighborhood median income, or where you attained your education. The impact of power can create waves of change when it is not viewed as something that is limited to a select classification of people. I am a firm believer that once you unlock your sense of power there is nothing that can be done to snatch it away from you.

When I first learned power and its meaning, I was in the 5th grade. Every school year, Mr. J, as we always referred to him, took a group of 35 boys into his classroom. Mr. J had the stature of a basketball player and, to a 5th grade pre-teen, seemed larger than life. I had earnestly hoped the day would come I was a student in his class.

On the very first day of class, Mr. J challenged us with the words *"who will you become in life?"* All of us in his class came from the same or similar social-economic backgrounds and/or family dynamics. The twilight of elementary and middle school years for many children marks the turning point that sets them on the particular trajectory they will take in life. The many factors that play a part specifically in who our black boys become make it important to have black men teachers and administrators in our schools.

I grew up in a low-income housing project community called Paradise, but the name itself was a catfish because it was nothing of the sort. We were connected not only by our social-economic status but our trauma as well. Just two years prior a classmate of ours was murdered by his own mother. His death sent waves through the school that would be carried for years to come. His mother, who sadly struggled with drug addiction, was released from Saint E's and granted custody of him. However, she couldn't overcome the woes of her past. Unaddressed trauma handed down from one generation of "at-risk" children growing up in underfunded communities passed down to the next generation remains a cycle unless a true sense of power is unlocked for those whose lives otherwise would not amount to anything.

Mr. J's impact on us as a class was more than his witty rebuttals to the other boys in the class when they tried to make a joke, more than our weekly pizza parties, and more than going to a basketball game. His impact on us would shape who we'd eventually become. The twilight of elementary school is a difficult reality for some children and families to accept. The thought of going into middle school, being around children taller or bigger than you in size can be intimidating. It's even more intimidating when you feel you don't know who you'll become or what you'll ascribe to be in life. The command Mr. J had when he entered the room or spoke was very impressionable for me as a child with an absentee father. This gave me and all the other boys in the class a positive role model to emulate when there were very few we could look toward.



Schools' staff are often made up of predominantly women and parent-teacher conferences have the same dynamic. When you must navigate an unfamiliar or uncomfortable space it can be challenging to handle. Watching Mr. J build relationships with many of the teachers we perceived as mean gave me the understanding early that you can find a common ground even if you and the person don't agree.

That was even more on display when Mr. J had to tell my mother he didn't agree with her push for me to be a part of a student improvement program at the school because I was a top-performing student. I had not ever seen my mom get so quiet. He explained to her that I was excelling in my core subjects and thought it was in my best interest to improve my writing skills as it would be most needed in middle school and beyond. Eventually, my mom understood, and I hadn't let this day go since. The day stands out to me not because my mom sat quietly for what felt like forever but because Mr. J had empowered me to never back down from your belief. His lessons that year were endless, and I carry them with me to this day.

