

FROM HUSTLIN' TO HALLELUJAH

MY JOURNEY FROM
CHICAGO'S SOUTHSIDE
TO GOD'S SIDE

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*To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Without You, nothing would be possible.
But with You, all things are possible.
Thanks for saving my soul and making me a steward
of the mysteries and a proclaimer of Your eternal truths.*

*To Greta, my lovely wife, Queen, soul mate and eternal best friend.
I love you more than you will ever know. Thanks for always believing
in me and supporting the call to serve Christ in my life.*

*To Patrice Janelle, Alaina Denise, and
Quinn Michelle, our beautiful daughters and Princesses.
We are so proud of the young women you have become.*

*To Mrs. Myrtis Lee Adams (1936-2003).
Thanks, Mama, for being a woman of great vision and
helping me see that I "could do whatever I put my mind to."*

*And, to little brothers Delrick, Michael and
Micrin "Tyrell" Adams (1968-1980).
Man, it's hard sometimes to believe that we've made it this far.
Now, it's your time to shine.*

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CHAPTER TWO

YOUNG, GIFTED AND BROKE

*“Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair...”*
— LANGSTON HUGHES (“MOTHER TO SON”)

In the beginning, I lived with both of my parents. But before long our home fell into the same plight that has plagued too many families in our times. Fatherlessness. My parents separated when I was 7 years old. For the next 23 years, my brothers and I did not have any contact with my father, Presitley Timothy Adams, Jr. Although we were able to have conversations with him again six months before he died of throat cancer, I never saw his face after he left us when I was 7. It was apparent that in those final days my father was seeking to make amends for abandoning us, though he never said so. By the time we began talking with him in those final days, I was 30, married, in ministry and had two children of my own.

I attended Altgeld Elementary School on 71st and Loomis Avenue in Chicago from 2nd grade to 8th grade. I enjoyed Altgeld, excelled in education, and was promoted from 2nd grade to 4th grade because of my academic achievements, even though we had

dated text books, worn out desks and a shortage of equipment to go around in arts, music classes and for sports programs. School allowed me to get away from the impoverishment of my home life, at least for a few hours on weekdays during the school year.

War Zones

It would be difficult for somebody to imagine what life was like in my world from ages 6 to 12, unless they had been there to experience it firsthand. Just getting to school was a tremendously dangerous task. We walked about a mile to school daily, in rain, snow, sleet, or shine. But the weather wasn't the biggest factor, the gangs were. You see, we had to traverse through at least two rival gang territories just to get there. The Blackstone Rangers (who later evolved into The Almighty Black P. Stone Nation, and still later The El-Rukns) and Black Disciples (who evolved into the Black Gangster Disciples Nation or "GD's") constantly fought for control of the turf between 68th and Justine, and 71st and Loomis. One had to become skilled in navigating through these urban warzones in order to make it safely to school and back.

Going to class in the morning was not quite as bad as returning home in the afternoon. By 3:15 p.m. when school let out, most of the "gang bangers" were awake and kicking. It was common for those of us who didn't live around the school to be prepared to fight our way home, which really was a combination of running and fighting because the gang members had us sorely outnumbered. Nonetheless, going to school was not an option for me and my brothers. Mama didn't play in this area. School attendance and good grades were mandated in our household. To breach either obligation meant punishment that could range from losing the privilege of outside recreation after school, to more severe penalties that included "The County Belt," a two-inch thick strap Mama kept handy for discipline and had no problem applying to our backsides.

Most of the houses in our Southside neighborhood were rat- and roach-infested. When I say “infested,” I mean crawling with them. Every few months, we would have to “bomb” our house in an attempt to kill as many roaches as we could. But because every other house was infested, the roaches would just go from the house that had been bombed to another home nearby and wait for the effects of the poison to wear off. Then they would return to the house they’d scattered from and set up shop again. Roaches must be the worst pests known to humans. They were obviously put here to torture poor people who have few options outside of the rundown, dilapidated dwelling places where these insects seem to thrive. We had so many roaches that they would be in all of our clothes, our nonperishable food, and even our refrigerator.

I will never forget an experience that I had while eating a piece of cake during celebrations with my family on my 8th or 9th birthday. After we had eaten some, the cake was put in the refrigerator to keep it fresh overnight. The next day, I was anxious to eat another piece of my birthday cake. I ran to the refrigerator, pulled the cake out, cut a nice size piece, poured myself a glass of milk, and sat down to feast. After about two bites I noticed something moving inside of the cake. To my disgust, it was a roach which had embedded itself in the dessert while it was stored in the icebox. The battle to keep the bugs off of us and out of our food was an everyday scrap. Humans and insects struggle to occupy the same space in the ghetto, often preying on each other.

My brothers and I used to play a game with the roaches. We would turn off the lights in our bedroom and count to 10. Then we’d flip the light switch back on and find the wall literally covered with roaches. Next we would engage in target practice by seeing how many of them we could pop off of the wall by shooting rubber bands that we had knotted together at them. This may sound gross and primitive, but we were just four boys in the heart of the ghetto. What else did we know?

It wasn’t just the roaches we had to contend with. The rats would

get so bad that we couldn't afford to go for long without having traps all over the house. Additionally, every month or so, I remember Mama going through all of the closets and drawers searching for mice. Unless she'd done this, the rodents would have gotten into secluded spaces and bred more. These hiding areas provided ripe conditions for their breeding, including shelter and warmth. I can remember Mama flushing what seemed like hundreds of baby mice down the toilet.

There were warning signs posted in all of the alleys because the rats could grow to the size of kittens and were not afraid to attack people. Rat bites are infectious. It was not uncommon to hear stories in the neighborhood and on the news about people, especially babies, being bitten by rats. When we took out the trash, we had to throw rocks at the cans first to scatter the rats. If we didn't and lifted the tops off of the cans, we could be attacked by the rats that were in the garbage. For my family and those in the ghetto, these experiences were a real part of our daily lives.

During most of my pre-teen years, my mother supported her four sons by working low-paying jobs, with the assistance of welfare, including food stamps. We never had any money to speak of, owned a car, or enjoyed the finer things in life, such as eating out, traveling and shopping trips. To compensate for our lack, Mama would do things like load us up in my aunt's station wagon and take us to the drive-in movie. Since we could not afford to buy food at the concession stand, we would take our own hotdogs, chips, and popcorn. We would either buy sodas and freeze them ahead so they'd remain cold, or make jugs of Kool-Aid. We wore hand-me-down clothes, got most of our toys from the Goodwill and/or other social services agencies, and were frequently present at the holiday giveaways. Now, this is not to say that my mother did not do her best. She did manage to scrape up enough money to buy us new clothes at the start of each school year. And we had "church clothes" that we could only wear to Sunday services. But overall, poverty was the norm for us. We may not have had much

materially, but we did have a lot of love. Looking back, I wouldn't trade my life for anyone's.

Yet the lack of having things is what drove me to the street – to the desire and ultimately, the practice, of hustling. What Mama couldn't give to me, I found necessary to acquire on my own. And hustling was the only way I saw to get it.

My grooming from the streets began early in life. Lacking positive male role models, my peers and I would learn what we thought at the time were “real manhood” skills from the streets beginning in our elementary years. By the age of 11, I was sexually active, smoking cigarettes and cigars, drinking cheap wine, learning to shoot dice and play cards for money, pitching pennies, and conning for what I wanted. I was just a kid in age but in my mind I was a young man, a street soldier in the making. This is one of the unfortunate realities of growing up in the underclass. Too many of our children don't really get to have a childhood. When they should be riding bikes, playing baseball or basketball, jumping rope, or skipping at hopscotch, they are forced to concentrate on just surviving. And survival means learning the ways of the street because in the streets, it's survive or die.

The Dangerous Game of 'R-e-s-p-e-c-t'

In the street, being a man is not represented by going to school, getting a good education or showing care and concern for other human beings. In fact, it is just the opposite. On the street, you must prove that you are a man by never showing weakness, be it physical or emotional, and learning how to hustle – legally and illegally – to stay alive. You cannot be a “man” without watching your back at all times and never trusting anyone. This mentality, a necessary behavioral mechanism to survive in urban environments, frequently leads to disputes that quickly turn violent and far too often ends with somebody getting maimed or killed.

Author Elijah Anderson's book, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, notes that typically the ghetto "environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values (and most of the homes in my community did, including our home) must be able to handle themselves in a street environment." He attributes this reality to what he defines as the "code of the street." Accordingly, this code "amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence," he wrote.

In his preface to *Code of the Street*, Anderson explained the unwritten law of the street this way: "In some of the most economically depressed and drug- and crime-ridden pockets of the city, the rules of civil law have been severely weakened, and in their stead a 'code of the street' often holds sway. At the heart of this code is a set of prescriptions, or informal rules, of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence among so many residents, particularly young men and women. Possession of respect – and the credible threat of vengeance – is highly valued for shielding the ordinary person from the interpersonal violence of the street."

The "Queen of Soul," Aretha Franklin, sang about it in her hit song "Respect." One of the codes that are evident, both on the street and in America's prisons, deals with the issue of respect. I am not referring to a general dictionary definition of the word respect, which is defined as "being thoughtful of, concern or consideration, or polite regard." Rather, "respect" in the urban ghettos of our cities means not allowing anyone to do anything that can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Most of the time, one's very survival depends primarily on one's ability to not allow anyone to "dis," or "dis-respect" him. "Dissing" or being "dissed" may include maintaining eye contact with somebody for a few more seconds than that person is comfortable with, an innocent glance that is misinterpreted by another person as a slight, accidentally stepping on someone's foot, using profanity towards somebody, and especially "playing



This illustration is an artist rendering of my life *From Hustlin' To Hallelujah*. The artist is a young man named Darreld D. (Duran) Smith, who I have personally mentored since he was 10 years old.