

In My Own Words

FARAJII R. MUHAMMAD

AGE 29, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND USA

I always knew my life would be used for something great. But there I was—a trained actor from the Baltimore School for the Arts, a couple years out of high school—with an undetermined future.

I wanted to do something for my people, but I also wanted to be the next Denzel Washington. My mind said it would be foolish to let my acting training go to waste. My heart said I was born to serve a bigger cause.

Growing up in the Nation of Islam, I learned that my life as a young black man was valuable. Yet today, I see youth as an endangered species—under attack socially, politically and economically. I couldn't sit idly by and watch my peers and my community deteriorate. I had the passion, talent and foundation of my beliefs to improve life for those around me. I only needed the opportunity.

Once I decided to devote myself to developing young leaders, the doors of opportunity opened up. In 1999, my future wife, Tamara, and I started New Light Leadership Coalition (NLLC). She was 17. I was 19. We had no idea how to operate a nonprofit organization, but we shared the desire to make young people leaders. We both wanted to change the culture where young people are being used to promote an agenda led by adults—adults who only engage us when cameras are around. We also grew tired of seeing young people wasting their innate leadership abilities.

Young people in Baltimore face many challenges. The high school dropout rate for black males has climbed above 60 percent. Homicides totaled nearly

300 last year, with many victims in their teens and early 20s. Baltimore has more young people on the streets than in the workplace.

In addition to the external challenges, primary internal impediments—for black youth, in particular—include self-hatred and lack of self-knowledge. These two conditions have led black youth in a downward spiral. Despite the chaos, confusion and dissatisfaction, I believe young people are capable of doing great things.

NLLC hosted its first leadership conference in Baltimore in November 1999. We wanted to address how young people see themselves. Surprisingly, the event attracted 100 students from around the city. I knew something major had just happened. A change was taking place, with young people at the center.

Since then, NLLC has trained more than 2,000 young people nationwide on key principles of leadership. We also give young people the tools to resolve conflicts, become youth entrepreneurs, engage politically and operate and manage student organizations.

We have to change the thinking of young people before making any changes on the streets or in the halls of power. I want young people to see their lives as valuable. I want them to break down old, oppressive structures and usher in a new reality that benefits us all. This is the mission I was called to do, and it will be my contribution to make this a better world. **Y**

Farajii R. Muhammad serves as President of the nonprofit Baltimore-based youth organization New Light Leadership Coalition, Inc. For more information about NLLC, visit www.nllc.org.

Farajii Muhammad and his future wife Tamara were teenagers when they founded a youth leadership organization in Baltimore.

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CHRISTOPHER MYERS

