Knights in Crown Heights

Jesse Cameron Alick mentors his young, black padawan in the ways of the big bad world.

December 1, 2008 By Jesse Cameron Alick

Five years ago I moved to the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. The first thing I noticed about my building was a sprinkling of blunt wrappers in the hallway outside my apartment door. I'd clean them up—they'd reappear the next day as if by magic.

Finally one evening as I was sitting in my living room, I caught the scent of marijuana wafting in from the hallway. I opened my front door and saw an 18-year-old black kid sitting on the stairs smoking weed.

"Julian" (not his real name) lived downstairs with his parents. Since they didn't like him to smoke weed in the house, he made a habit of going into the hallway. I invited Julian in and told him never to hesitate to knock on my door.

Three years later, Julian still knocks on my door every night. We've developed a sort of unofficial mentorship program. We discuss women, business, religion, the merits of capitalism versus socialism. I'm his older Scorpio brother, and Julian is my padawan (for those of you not hip to *Star Wars* lingo, a padawan is a Jedi Knight in training).

Despite Julian's obvious intelligence, he lacks some basic information about the world. During a heated discussion, he stopped me for clarification about where Mexico was in relation to Canada. I just wanted to scream, "Who were your teachers?" 'Cause they failed him.

Julian is one of the most curious, insightful people I've ever met—so why is he woefully uninformed? Because some adults discounted him as a failure from the beginning? Because they couldn't "speak his language"? Because they just didn't have the patience?

I learned the most important things in life from conversations with my father, weekly coffees with a 40-year-old musician and lunches with my elderly neighbors. I learned that in this world, we live by rules. Although you don't have to—and shouldn't always—obey these rules, you must learn them.

I can't imagine what would've happened to me if older people hadn't taken an interest in the foundation of my education. It's not easy being a black man in 2008, with violence and disease

threatening to crash into my life from all directions. Sometimes I think it’s too late for me and my young brothers—society has already done all the damage it can do.

Finding a vaccine for HIV is less about making our own lives better than it is about improving the world for the ones to whom we will bequeath it. In a time when many young black men are growing up with absent fathers, it’s important for role models—and for me as an HIV-positive black man—to step forward and talk to them about HIV prevention and the realities of living with HIV. It’s our
responsibility to connect with young people and to discuss with them the journeys we’re on, the opportunities we take and the risks we face in the big bad world.

I bring up HIV with Julian every so often, usually when he’s talking about a girl. I say, “You’re wearing a condom, right?” He says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I say, “Don’t yeah, yeah, yeah me—you gotta be safe.” It’s not easy, but I keep at it.

Julian and I sit in my living room—he’s listening to me ramble about U.S. politics, emotional discipline and the notion of time travel; it’s just another night in Crown Heights.

During a pause in my rant, Julian poses a question: “Have you ever considered becoming a teacher?” I shrug and respond, “Why do you ask?”

“You speak in a way that makes so much sense,” Julian says. Then he becomes very serious. “You know why I come up here every night?”

I suggest with a smile, “So you can smoke?” He says, “Man, it’s to talk with you. I appreciate our talks.”

I think about another lesson I could teach him—about how none of us would be here without the generosity of those who came before us and how it’s our spiritual duty to help others in the same ways we’ve been helped. But I decide some things are better left unsaid. Besides, I’m sure he’ll learn that lesson on his own one day.

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