

December 5, 2010

Dr. Adewale Troutman | A life-changing shift for Dr. Troutman

College opportunity made the difference

*By Dr. Adewale Troutman
Special to The Courier-Journal*

I was never supposed to have M.D. after my name. Or M.P.H., for master's degree in public health. Or M.A., for my master's degree in Black Studies. Or B.A., for my bachelor's degree in physical education.

I grew up in a single-parent home in a low-income neighborhood in the South Bronx in a world of low expectations.

No one I knew had gone to college. In junior high, a guidance counselor suggested I go to vocational school to become a mechanic. Other counselors told me bluntly, "You are not college material." And I believed it. At the end of high school, my GPA was D-plus.

But a few people made a difference.

My mother, who worked as a secretary, told me, "You can be anything you want to be." I was a shy kid with a secret love of science and dreams of becoming an astronomer — and my fifth-grade teacher Miss Sabatini encouraged me. After I got my high school diploma, a girlfriend brought me an application for community college. She insisted I fill it out.

And so, I started down a new path.

I thought about my educational experiences as I heard about the new partnership here in Louisville called 55,000 Degrees. Its goal is to increase the number of college degrees in this community so that half of Louisville's working-age adults would have college degrees — and the new opportunities that come with them.

This new partnership hit home for me personally — and also professionally, as this city's Director of Public Health and Wellness for seven years.

For one thing, it squarely addresses the wide achievement gap when it comes to higher education and race. In Louisville, one recent study showed that among adults 25 and older, 30 percent of white residents have bachelor's degrees or higher — compared with 14 percent of African Americans.

I know that gap. I almost lived it. I'm so glad that leaders in Louisville's African-American community have already come together to work for solutions — and have committed themselves to adding 15,000 new African-American degree holders as part of this 55,000 Degrees initiative.

Second, I'm glad this initiative recognizes the challenges of access to college and affordability. The application I filled out was to Bronx Community College. It was close to home and it was free. Without that, I never would have started.

It would be nice to report that I immediately became a brilliant student — and proved all of my school counselors wrong. Well, I didn't. I failed my first semester, as I focused on wrestling, basketball and girls. I took too many classes. I didn't know the ropes. I had no role models.

The second semester, it clicked. Not that I had big dreams of a medical degree at that point. I just wanted good enough grades to stay on the wrestling team.

Third and last, I'm glad the 55,000 Degrees partnership understands that college students like me — with no family tradition of college — often take it one step at a time.

I found more confidence, in part through a student organization which drew me into civil rights issues and a deeper understanding of black history.

I mentored kids who grew up like me. I knew from my own experiences that young people are vulnerable and impressionable — and supportive messages can make all the difference.

Gradually, I got over this idea that I wasn't smart enough. My first ambition was to teach PE. That's what I did for a couple years after I graduated with a bachelor of arts from Lehman College in New York.

Then I realized I wanted to make a change in society that I was not going to make as a PE teacher.

So, I thought: medical school. I can do this. I wanted to focus on the ills of society — literally.

I eventually earned that master's in public health as well, from Columbia University.

Over time my focus has been drawn to stark health inequities by race and socioeconomics.

The poorer you are, the less education you have, the lower your life expectancy.

The higher you go up the education ladder, the longer you are likely to live.

Education, in short, can save your life — or more accurately, increase the odds you will live a longer, healthier life.

The reasons range from access to medical care and health insurance to the safety of neighborhoods and availability of healthy food.

I make presentations about all of this research — and our work for health equity here in Louisville — when I attend medical conferences.

I tell my own personal story when I speak to young people.

The advice I give is simple:

Don't let anyone tell you what you can't do.

Be true to yourself.

And make your life count. Make a difference in society.

As I leave Louisville for a challenging new job in Florida, it's exciting to know that this community is uniting around educational goals that will open doors for more residents to find opportunities to make a difference in their hometown — as my favorite mayor, Jerry Abramson, would say.

I hope I will hear that Louisville residents earn more than 55,000 degrees by 2020. I will be cheering for you.

Dr. Adewale Troutman has been Louisville's Director of Public Health and Wellness for seven years. This month he became the new director of the University of South Florida's Public Health Practice and Public Health Leadership Institute.
