

James White III

MY STORY

My heart was racing as I ran through the back door. Flashlights beamed overhead and weapons were drawn on me. “Get down! Get down! Get down!” In fear of being seriously injured—or worse, killed—I fell to the ground and put my hands atop my head. I was immediately surrounded by multiple officers and swiftly cuffed. In a state of terror, I sat in booking for hours. Eventually, a detective questioned me and began to read off the charges. His last, bitter words were, “I’ll see you in thirty years.”

As a twenty-one year old, high school dropout, I had reached the lowest point of my life. Growing up, my perception of how one ought to escape poverty was skewed. No one in my household finished high school. Raised primarily by my mother, who struggled with drug addiction, I was exposed at a young age to drug users and dealers. I began to live a life of crime, which led to two years of incarceration and eight years of probation—experiences that taught me more about hope in the future than I could have ever imagined. Seven months prior to my release date, I attained my GED, stoking my academic curiosity and paving the way to the success in college for which I would be so grateful.

Following my release, I met Minister Hall—the woman who is responsible for my enrollment into college. Her direction and guidance enabled me to employ a new way of thinking and, ultimately, to receive an acceptance letter from Benedict College. I enrolled and majored in education because I believed my experiences could be useful in the classroom, a place where African-American males are disciplined at disproportionate rates and herded toward the criminal justice system. As a young, black man who fit that tragic narrative, I sought to motivate and mentor others like me to rise above their challenges and circumstances.

During my junior year of college, I passed South Carolina’s teacher certification test; yet, my past—the one I tried to leave behind—resurfaced and halted my aspirations. Due to my felony conviction, I could not pass the background check required for student teaching; as a result, I was forced to change my major. Determined to impact the rate at which youth are afflicted by the consequences of poverty, I decided to use my passions and skills to effect change in the criminal justice system. Accordingly, I made a commitment to pursue a law degree.

Unfortunately ex-offenders are excluded from many employment opportunities. So, my experiences interning with the South Carolina Office of the Attorney General, South Carolina Legislative Black Caucus, and as a UNCF-Walton Education Reform Fellow were an anomaly. However, with each opportunity, I sharpened my knowledge of the inequity and disadvantages to which people of color are subjected—always keeping my goal of criminal justice reform in mind. If airplanes crashed at the rate at which African-American males are incarcerated, the entire nation would be outraged and galvanized. Yet, the lives—including my life—of African-American males, and the injustices perpetrated against them, are deemed unworthy of such outrage.

My experiences with poverty, incarceration, government, and education have empowered me to help change this disturbing reality. I plan to use my law degree to become a district attorney. Ninety-five percent of elected prosecutors are white, while fourteen states have no elected prosecutors of color at all. Most criminal cases are resolved through plea-bargaining, where prosecutors, not judges, negotiate whether, and for how long a defendant is incarcerated. I believe that prosecutors should intimately understand the realities and collateral consequences of incarceration, just as a police officer must know what a Taser feels like before being permitted to use one against someone else. Therefore, I seek to occupy this role: the role of a principled

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community leader, informed by his experiences with criminal justice. I will use democracy and discretion to make structural changes in order to eliminate the economic deprivation, civic exploitation and incarceration of people of color.

Like too many African-American males, my life had once been shaped by my mistakes and misfortune. In spite of these challenges, I am extremely grateful to have recently graduated summa cum laude. I

remain committed to being a model scholar and leader, and to changing the lives of disadvantaged youth. Trials is the perfect opportunity to focus my goals and to optimize my admission to leading law schools that will best fit with my passions and purpose. While I recognize that admission to the Trials Program is rigorous and competitive, my undeniable determination and fearless hope have and will continue to fuel my drive to effect positive change in the world.