

Khari M. Brown

Leveling the Learning Field

Growing up, Khari Brown's goal was to play professional basketball, so when he was cut from the high school team as a freshman, he was devastated. But the importance of the moment wasn't lost on him. "It fueled a fire in me," he remembers. "I decided I wasn't going to quit, and I kept practicing on my own. Luckily, someone left the team several weeks into the season, and the coach asked everyone who the jersey should go to. They asked me to join the team, and I was ready."

Though Khari rode the bench for much of the next three years, he worked hard and waited patiently until his big chance came his senior year. He had grown a few inches, and a teammate's injury gave him the opportunity to showcase the fruits of countless hours of practice. He suddenly became the star—not only of the team, but of the league. After playing all through college, he finally accomplished his goal of playing professionally by joining a team in Helsinki, Finland. "The whole experience taught me the importance of staying determined and using negative experiences as motivation toward positive outcomes," he says today. "It's a mindset I've used throughout my life, and one I've taught to young people along the way. The people who are most successful in life are the ones who don't give up under any circumstances, but instead look for alternate routes when they face setbacks."

Today, Khari's work is all about helping young people facing tremendous odds navigate alternate routes forward. As the Executive Director of Capital Partners for Education (CPE), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping motivated, low-income students realize their potential and fulfill the dream of a college education, he is leading the effort in D.C. to level the playing field by leveling the learning field. "I firmly believe that, to whom much is given, much is expected," he affirms. "I came from a great

family who nurtured and supported me, always pressing the importance of education. I've achieved some success, but if I had been born into different circumstances, I may not have achieved anything at all. That's why I'm committed to changing the odds for people who lack the advantages I had."

CPE was founded in 1993 by Ambassador Henry Owen and Ted Schwab with the mission of helping motivated low-income high school students get into college. In more recent years, it has added the goal of seeing those students through to graduating from college as well. "Despite the immense wealth in our city, and despite the fact that we're the most educated region in the U.S., we also have some of the greatest poverty in the nation," Khari points out. "D.C. has one of the greatest wealth disparities and income gaps, and because income translates to education and success in life, we find this unacceptable."

With this mission in mind, CPE works with poor children living in under-resourced neighborhoods where few kids go to college and begins by sending them to high-quality high schools. "If you want to go to college, you need to attend an academically rigorous school that has high expectations of you and will teach you the foundation to do college-level work," he explains. "The only options for those kids were magnet schools or private schools, so CPE began providing private high school scholarships and partnering with schools to cover tuition."

The organization recognized early on, however, that just going to a good high school wasn't enough. Many of these children were the first in their families or communities to set their sights on higher education, so the adults in their lives didn't have the background or knowledge to provide sufficient support through the college application process. Thus, CPE set up a volunteer



mentoring program to match students with people who could guide them through the process one-on-one, filling in the gaps created by poverty. "Many kids don't have a network to draw on for career ideas, or someone to help them with their homework, or even a computer at home," Khari points out. "Many of our kids' families don't have bank accounts and don't know how to apply for financial aid, which means kids later find themselves having to drop out or transfer for financial reasons."

Indeed, while 82 percent of upper income college students graduate from college once they've started, only 8 percent of low-income youth see that success. While education philanthropy used to measure success by the number of kids an organization got in to college, it has since shifted its sights to measure success by how many are finishing, how much debt they accrue, and the kinds of jobs they're able to get once finished. Aiming to level the learning field, CPE's board and 11 professional staff members provide individualized support to its team of 180 mentors and also work directly with schools and families, hosting weekend workshops to promote college readiness, career readiness, and financial literacy. Thanks to these remarkable efforts, 99 percent of CPE's graduates enroll in college, and 72 percent graduate within six years.

"We're very proud of that success and are actively trying to expand our footprint," Khari affirms. "For years, we've been a highly successful yet niche program working primarily with kids in private school. But a few years ago, we took a step back and realized that a program as successful as ours has a responsibility to have a greater impact. Helping a few hundred kids isn't enough when there are thousands who aren't getting the help they need." With this broadened vision, Khari and his team adjusted their program model and became the only organization in the Washington area to adopt an e-mentoring platform, which allows its mentors and mentees to email each other on a weekly basis between monthly meetings. The tool has been transformative in establishing greater efficiency, standardization, and effectiveness, allowing CPE to serve more students at a lower cost.

To achieve a more expansive impact, the program also added a new point of entry. Whereas it used to work only with students who enrolled in CPE during their ninth grade year, it began

accepting eleventh-graders as they entered their second semester, focusing on providing guidance through the last three semesters of high school. "These kids are on the college track, but they need help navigating the process," Khari says. "They don't have the social capital, the agency, or the social skills to succeed in college once they get there, and they don't know how to ask for help or handle the financial components of the equation."

As Khari rolled out these two advancements in 2012, he set his sights on raising seed money and doubling the program in two years. In 2013, CPE's student body grew by 40 percent, and the program raised the funds to grow a projected 40 percent through 2014. The growth is aggressive, but strategic, well-planned, and justifiably urgent. "Unless you're preparing for a technical degree, you'll be left out of this economy if you don't get a college degree," he affirms. "You won't make enough to support your family, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and setting your own children up for failure. The current generation is depending on CPE just as much as the next generation is, so it's imperative that we succeed."

This hard-driving, unrelenting, mission-oriented approach to life, legacy, and work was first modeled for Khari by his parents when he was a young child. Born and raised in the Boston area, his mother was a speech and language development specialist for young children, and his father was a photographer and professor. They instilled in him the value of hard work, honesty, empathy, reliability, and high expectations for all he did. "Every day, they got up and went to work, and I rarely missed a day of school," he remembers. "They taught me that, even on your bad days, you show up and make the best of it, because people are counting on you."

Khari's mother was a music major in college, and his father had a masters from the Rhode Island School of Design. Their passion for art rubbed off on their son to a degree, but he was drawn to athletics in a way they didn't understand. When he started playing organized basketball at age eight, he fell in love with it immediately. Through team sports, he learned the thrill of competing with others and the art of dealing with different personalities. From observing his coaches, becoming a captain, and later becoming a coach himself, he learned how to use different leadership philosophies with different people to help them achieve success

individually, garnering success for the team as a whole.

For the active young boy, academics was far less exciting than athletics, but thankfully, Khari had a mother who sat patiently by his side in the evenings, teaching him how to write and reviewing his applications when college drew near. He was recruited by Division III schools and was accepted at Tufts University, where his father had been the first in his family to earn a degree after attending the institution as a night student.

At Tufts, Khari's interest in academics awakened. Gerald Gill, a professor of history and Khari's advisor, was a particularly important driving force in that awakening. After Khari turned in his first paper to the professor, Dr. Gill called him into his office and told him he wouldn't accept the work because he knew Khari could do better. Khari rewrote the paper, only to be told again that it was subpar. "I ended up getting a C- on that assignment," he laughs now. "But he saw something in me that I didn't quite see in myself. Now that I run a mentoring organization, I know that that's one of the most important jobs of a mentor—to identify things in your mentee and push them toward those things. He believed in me in a way I didn't believe in myself at the time, and that was hugely powerful."

When Khari graduated and crossed the Atlantic Ocean to realize his lifelong dream of playing professional basketball, he felt he was on top of the world. But as he found himself struggling with both language and cultural barriers in his new home, he found that things weren't as easy as he imagined they'd be. The lack of sunlight in the winter left him depressed, and he was injured several times in games.

Still, he didn't quit. When he came home to the states for Christmas, he spent time reflecting and then returned to Finland with a new perspective and fresh approach. "I ended up having a terrific experience," he recalls. "In that case, perseverance and resilience were about stepping back and removing some of the emotion from the situation to take a more tactical approach to the problem. That process became another important tool in my business toolbox later in life, offering an objective and productive way of looking at problems."

When Khari finished up his year-long contract in Finland and returned to the U.S., he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. After

identifying as a basketball star and investing his energy in that dream for so long, he suddenly felt like a nobody without any direction. "Growing up comfortably in the middle class, I didn't have the drive to make money," he remarks. "I had no clear aspirations, and it took me a while to figure it out, but I ended up getting into coaching because I thought I might want to go back overseas."

Khari began earning a good living as a personal trainer, but the idea of pursuing his entrepreneurial drive in the weight room, either as a trainer or a small business owner, wasn't intellectually fulfilling to him. What really drove him were the underprivileged high school kids he was coaching on the side. Over the three years he worked in that capacity, his kids won over 90 percent of their games, making it to state finals one year. They exhibited tremendous talent and motivation, and many went on to play college basketball.

One of the kids, David, was having a hard time breaking 700 on his SATs, so Khari began working with him after practice to figure out the problem. "I couldn't believe it," he recounts. "Though he was a B student, he was an eleventh grader operating at a fifth grade reading level. Because he was polite, handsome, charming, and a good athlete, his teachers had just passed him without giving him the help he needed. Nobody had expected him to do well in school and succeed academically, so he hadn't. There was no challenge to rise to because nobody was challenging him. I decided then and there that that was unacceptable. I would let kids like David know I had high expectations for them, and I would work with them to reach those expectations." Just like Professor Gill challenged him to do better, Khari vowed to see the potential in these kids that they couldn't see in themselves.

When Khari woke up the next morning, he knew he wanted to become a teacher. With that, he returned to Tufts to earn his masters in education while working as a graduate assistant, coach, and residential life assistant. When he finished his degree at age 28, he decided he was ready to move outside the seven-mile radius where he had spent the majority of his life, relocating to Washington, D.C. When he was introduced to Ted Schwab, he set up an informational interview to learn more about CPE and his overall interest in education.

With that, Khari bought a suit, went in to meet with CPE's executive director to learn more

about the organization, and found himself in the right place at the right time. It was the man's last day on the job, and the organization was looking for someone to replace him. As he reviewed Khari's short resume, he said, "You'd be great, but you've never really had a job before."

It was true that Khari had never interviewed for a job before, let alone accrued nonprofit management experience. Still, the fact that he was an ideal fit for the position couldn't be denied. "My athletic background speaks to my drive, discipline, and determination, and I tend to view everything through the lens of being a coach," he explains. "To me, it's all about motivating people, management, and leadership. We discussed this informally, and I had no intention of selling myself to get a job, but something just clicked."

Doubting his own capacity to succeed in the position, Khari considered turning it down, but a close friend was adamant that it was one of those things in life he had to step up and say yes to. When he accepted the position in 2001, he hit the ground running, determined to rise to the challenge against all odds. It took a full five years to get the mentoring program running like a well-oiled machine, but it has since developed into one of the best in Washington, and Khari's own evolution as a leader parallels that journey. "Part of my leadership style is trusting people," he says. "I make sure to get the right people in the right seats on the bus, and then I give them a lot of room to operate. This gives them the freedom to be more creative, innovative, and effective in their work. I'm all about the power of we, making sure each board member, donor, employee, and volunteer mentor understands the crucial role they play in our mission."

Indeed, CPE is all about the mission. Its Board of Directors are high-powered executives who choose to invest their time and money in the program because they understand that the difference that investment makes. Its mentors commit six hours a month for two years to a student for no pay because they understand the pivotal impact that a reliable, present role model has for these kids. They expect as much as they

give because they understand how powerful expectations can be. "The entire CPE team is driving this program forward and transforming the future of D.C.'s low-income youth, one child at a time," Khari affirms. "They're the reason we were named one of the top local charities by *Washingtonian Magazine* and the *Catalogue for Philanthropy*. They're the reason we won the Neighborhood Builders Award from Bank of America, a grant that will help us reach our potential as we help these kids reach theirs."

Today, Khari and his wife, Yasemin, balance their lives as executives with the responsibilities of giving their own children the best possible chances in life. "We support each other in our careers and in parenting," he says. "She's loving and encouraging of all I do, and we've really made it a priority to be there to raise our kids together." They both support the Rosemont Center, an early childhood education program serving needy families in D.C. and aims to head off the cycle of poverty at its source at the very beginning of life. Their professional, personal, and philanthropic efforts dovetail in a mission that expects as much of society as they do of themselves, daring it to rise to the challenge and level the learning field.

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