Finding a Second Home

By Joey Rodriguez

I was born and raised in what is known as the most dangerous city in the United States: Camden, New Jersey. A city plagued with crime, drug sales and use, poverty, low high school graduation rates, and so much more. It is almost hard to think that anything positive could come out of this city. However, I am here to tell you that something has.

In 2004, I had the privilege of joining the Community and Urban Science Enrichment (CAUSE) Program at the Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium as a high school intern. Throughout my high school years, I attended the program about three to four times a week, learning about marine science, public speaking, and professionalism; participating in team building and life-skills training activities; and attending field excursions to places like Key West, Florida, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts. When you add that all up, I spent over 700 hours with the program. One might think that is a bit excessive—however, I did not. Instead, I valued the time that I spent at the center because of what this place did for me: it served as an escape from all the bad things happening in my city and even stressors at home. This program became a second home, a place where I was surrounded by individuals that welcomed
and supported me, challenged my skills, valued my opinion, and mentored me along the way. It was the potential that my supervisors and mentors saw in me that encouraged me to always try harder.

While in college, I worked as a supervisor for the CAUSE Program. I continued to grow professionally, but more importantly, I was able to take what I had learned and mentor incoming program participants. As a result, I graduated in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a strong desire to continue my work in youth development. At this point, I knew that my time in the CAUSE Program was not done and that I wanted to continue mentoring youth in Camden. Today, 12 years later, as the center's assistant manager of community engagement, running our CAUSE eighth grade Explorer Program, that momentum has not disappeared. I find that as a Camden resident and alumnus of the program, I have leverage in how I can relate to the students. I understand the struggles that they endure from our community and challenges that many of their families deal with. Knowing that this program was a place where I could be myself and feel welcomed, I ensure that I make that space for others in the program. I find that afterschool/youth programs serve an important purpose as they create opportunities for youth to explore and develop mentor/mentee connections.

Camden has a lot more to offer than what is portrayed in the media. This city is flourishing with capable, smart, motivated young leaders. I find it my responsibility to invest in my CAUSE teens and challenge them to beat the statistics, just as individuals invested in me.

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