

Harlem Born, Harlem Raised

I am a young man born and raised in Harlem, New York. Currently, my community is becoming more diverse. Harlem is being flooded by many ethnicities making the once predominately African-American community, one in which African-Americans are becoming the minority.

I am a young African- American male that has been subject to random searches by police officers that I feel is unfair and racially motivated. These are authority figures who are supposed to be present to protect my community. I have wondered why there have been so many officers in Harlem which isn't a borough but a small section within the borough of Manhattan. After much thought, I came to the realization that the heavy amount of officers that I see daily are not here to protect my community, but to protect the rising property value in Harlem from people who look like me-young, pan African/Latino people.

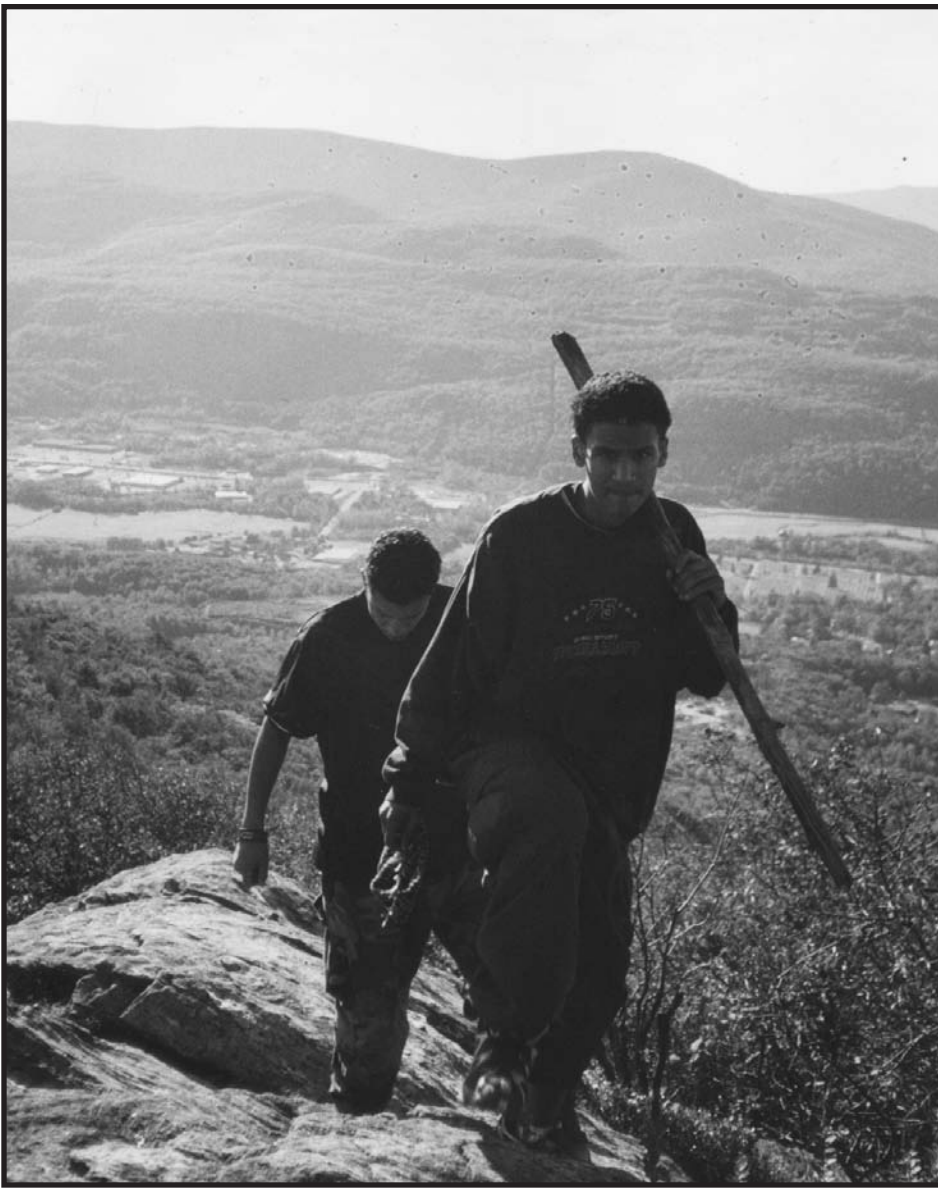
Random searches by police are just one of the issues I deal with as a young African-American male which could only be understood by others who have experienced this reality. Growing up, I've had no one in my life to talk to about these types of issues with. I lacked a strong male figure in my life; I was raised by my mother and older sister. Although I appreciate them both, I've always yearned for a positive male figure in my life, someone I could relate to, talk to and vent to. My mother and sister are strong women who did what they could to raise me to be a man but they could only do so much. Being raised by a woman has affected me positively and negatively. I am calm in demeanor and not as aggressive as many young men in my age group, but many of my questions remained unanswered. I struggled with trying to find my true identity and purpose, until I found The Brotherhood/Sister-Sol.

The Brother/Sister Sol is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping young people develop critical thinking skills, find direction and purpose in life. I am a proud member of the Intrinsic Kings Chapter of this organization and have been greatly influenced by my Chapter Leaders and the elder members of the organization. As member of the The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, I have learned history which is not a part of board of education's curriculum, such as my true ancestry and how certain institutions in society have been against the development and advancement of Pan-African and Latinos in America. As a member of this organization, I experienced college trips, retreats (which focused on developing the mind, body, and spirit), and weekly workshops about issues ranging from growing up as an African-American man to the election process, to health and hygiene. The Brotherhood/Sister-Sol *has* become the strong influential figure that I've needed all of my life. I now have people to look up to, to admire and to question about the difficulties of life. This organization provided me with foundation to build on and has been very inspirational.

The Brotherhood/Sister-Sol has also given me the tools to realize why I continued to have difficulty academically no matter how hard I tried and how badly I wanted to do well. They were there to help me pinpoint and reflect on certain things in my life, so that I could ultimately embrace my past and push for a better future. Throughout my high school career, I was always affected by the lack of stability in my life. I felt at times like my mother was too judgmental instead of helpful, I've always been disappointed that my father decided not to be a part of my life and the adults in my school constantly put me down. I have also had to deal with the violence in my high school which at times, made it difficult for me to be passionate about schoolwork. I have felt so much pressure as to whether I should stay in school or quit and my grades reflect this reality. However, my grades do not reflect my intelligence or my personality. Thanks to The Brotherhood/ Sister Sol, I have a new found respect for myself which allows me to endure and overcome the obstacles I encounter when it comes to school.

The Brotherhood/Sister Sol helped me bridged the gap between my childhood and my manhood. This organization has helped me make sense of what I've gone through in the past and has prepared me for my future. Although I am still trying to be a better man everyday, I am no longer lost in someone else's definition of what an African-American man should be. I am not the man certain institutions in my neighborhood have tried to make me out to be. Not only have I been able to define myself, but I have a more positive outlook on life and I am excited to find my place in this world. I have been inspired by the strength, vibrancy and influence of my history and I am eager to create a history of my own. I now look forward to my future and I am excited by it possibilities.





When I walk out of my house each day I cannot help but feel I am in a battlefield. Missiles are flying over my head and carnivorous bullets originating from advertisements and stereotypes are harming anyone with traces of individuality. My only weapons are my words, ideas, and thirst for knowledge. I have been born not only to win the battle, but also the war. I do this while focusing on the words of Fredrick Douglass as if they were the solution to all that is wrong: "Without struggle there is no progress." I will struggle to succeed.

I have realized the atrocities of today with the help of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol (Bro/Sis), a non-profit organization stationed in Harlem, NY created to empower Black and Latino youth. I am not what the mass media projects to the world, but instead I am human. I am an individual, not a statistic or consumer as viewed by the corporations of the world. Even though I am commonly portrayed as a hustler, gangster, rapper, thief, and misogynistic jester by the media and throughout history, I live in a reality where I am a brother, son, leader, and young man with goals that will shake the world itself. I have accepted that my brown skin is inescapable and I am proud of it and of my history.

- Sequan Spigner



Brotherhood Retreat Reflections

I learned a lot from this retreat. I learned what you do is up to you. Life is up to you. What path you take, what road you walk. This is the most important thing I will take home. All of my personal demons I will put behind me from now on. I am starting over. I will not let fear, guilt, laziness or anything else hold me. I will do what I need to do for me, my family and all my brothers and sisters that are not blood. I will be mentally strong, physically strong, and spiritually strong. I will be a man.

This was my first retreat here. I can say that I absolutely loved it. Things can't really get any better with a group of men.

To tell the truth, I had one of the best times of my life this weekend.

This weekend was the best I could ever ask for. It cleared my mind and set me up for things I need to take care of. It made me realize that you have to start and do your goals. Struggle for them. It's never gonna come to you without a battle. This weekend helped me relax my mind and start over fresh in New York. I gained love from my brothers and leaders. The trip opened my eyes and told me anything was possible. I think I was meant to be in this organization for a purpose and that purpose was to be successful. Without The Brotherhood I would probably be doing nothing for myself. I will bring back all the memories, statements and love that my Brothers have gave to me to be strong and say that nothing could stop me now because we are a strong unit that will never die or go out. Brotherhood forever.

This is one of the greatest moments of my life. The bonfire was one of the most spiritual moments of my life. Even though I didn't say much I learned a lot from my brothers in Intrinsic Kings and Eternally Unbreakable and I think this trip has made us closer and we all made one big step toward becoming men. When I go home my mind will be totally different from when I left. I am really going to start going after my priorities. I just want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My experiences from this retreat have been phenomenal. I have learned many life lessons and many lessons about becoming a man. These memories and experiences will stick with me. It will change me and make me a better man. These lessons have made the path to becoming a man an easy one. They have helped tremendously. One specific event that showed what I was capable of was 'follow the light' because it showed that no matter what, if you have a goal nothing will stop you from accomplishing it. I think this retreat has made me a better person, a better being.

To see how much love and compassion is expressed here, to see that there are people just like me, struggling to become better people, to become men, has really amazed me. The experience that affected me the most was the bonfire. I never have seen so much emotions, so much spirit, so much unity. It truly touched my

heart. I will never forget this retreat. When I go home today I'm going to bring these experiences with me. I'm going to apply them to my everyday life. I'm going to use them to succeed in life and on my journey to becoming a man. I have released myself from the chains that hold me back, now I will truly try my hardest and achieve my dreams. Today we talked about depression and it moved me how right they were, how right they were to solving the depression. I am one of these people who suffer from depression, who always has weight on his shoulders and I was surprised at how they said love was a cure and it is.

I want to bring home with me the will to actually do the many things I've talked about here. I don't want this to all be words, but instead actions. I will start practicing what I preach.

I come back to NYC's mean streets changed in attitude like my foot steps printed in snow.

The thing I would bring home with me is the fact that I have total and complete trust in all of my brothers.

I wouldn't take this experiences back for anything in the world.

I hope to keep this bond with my brothers until the day I die.

This weekend has helped to open my eyes. Looking at people's faces during the bonfire really showed me that this moment would stay in everyone's life forever. I just hope that everyone, myself included, takes the experience with them back to the City because we all need to apply what we learned this retreat to our everyday life. I hope everyone remembers what they threw into the fire and that they have the strength to do anything they want in life. I remember every experience with The Brotherhood well. I know this one will be just as special as the others. I can't wait until the next time I have another learning experience like this.

Being out here with brothers I really care about is a hi-light of my life. I truly do believe that I will always remember the talks and the fire, the sight of burning problems, the smell of burnt marshmallows and the tears that were dropped. I felt that when everyone spoke they recited words that came directly from the heart. The level of respect, humor and love made the heart-felt tears feel more comfortable showing up to kiss the fire warmed faces. These days will always be remembered. I will never forget being surrounded in love by those who really care. Everything around us was a symbol for our dreams. The fire burning represented our will to strive. The wood represented the demons we need to get rid of. The trees stood for the way we stick together and our unity. The stars above was us someday shining above it all. One thing I truly learned was the love from others was indeed true. What I taught was that the fight is in all of us and our dreams are to come.

The Brotherhood/Sister Sol partners with public secondary schools, creating single sex chapters that are sustained over the course of our members' high school careers. During weekly sessions,

Black and Latino young men explore critical social issues and new experiences, deconstruct messages about manhood and brotherhood, and develop life-long bonds. We have been very successful over the last 10 years building Brotherhood chapters and

The Brotherhood

retaining our membership. *Invincible & Untouchable, Knowledge of Self, Akoma, Infinite, Eternally Unbreakable, and Intrinsic Kings* Brotherhood chapters have between 12-24 members who have remained deeply committed during their time in the chapter and as alumni. As many of them say: "*Brotherhood for life.*" We believe several factors play an important role in our successful recruitment and retention:

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Staffing

At core is that we have had **dedicated and experienced Brotherhood Chapter Leaders**, six men who have been deeply committed to young men and who have been involved with our organization between 3 and 11 years. And they are available 24/7. This kind of consistency and commitment speaks volumes to our members and is necessary in order to do this and similar work well.

We Are Family

We know it is important that two distinct kinds of dedication are in place – **long term and wide-ranging**. Our young men are all too often experienced with adults, especially men, who come in and out of their lives. Men who say one thing and do another, men who promise to be there for them and then disappear. Brotherhood Chapter Leaders cannot be these types of men. We have often gone well above the call of duty in supporting and guiding our members. We have been there when they have cried and when they have had wonderful moments. We have been extremely careful to follow through on what we promise. If we say we will attend a game, or graduation, or a teacher meeting – we attend. We are there. Period. **They can count on us.** We have assisted our members in confronting individuals who have robbed them or threatened them. We have shown up in large numbers when a gang jumping was threatened. We have made court appearances and home visits. We have attended meetings in their schools to serve as allies and advocates. We have opened up our homes, given personal time, and funds. If we say this is a family, then this must be a family. We have shown, through word and deed, the **love and commitment** we have to members. **This level of dedication is contagious and encourages reciprocation.**

Recruitment = S.A.W.

Sight

Young Black and Latino men seeing older Black and Latino males walking through the halls of their school outfitted in Brotherhood T-shirts or hoodies with captivating images and quotes by Malcolm X, Roberto Clemente or Martin Luther King, Jr. is attractive to them. We wear "*Timbs*" and baggy jeans, or some aspect of the dress of the day, not to "look cool" but because that is how we dress. This raises the curiosity of potential members especially as in many of the schools in which we work **we may be the only Black and Latino males who are not custodians, coaches or security guards.** Thus we stand out and the young men are interested in what we are all about.

Association

Being men who are relatively close in age and who look young enough to be older brothers to our members makes it easier for us to relate to them and to potential new members, and vice versa. We look like Black and Latino men in their families and communities. We are able to speak their language (the slang of the day) and have an understanding of their perspective. This aids in our ability to make connections and develop bonds. We **play multiple roles in our members' lives that may be familiar to them and yet rarely found in one person:** *we must educate like a teacher, discipline like a father or grandfather, laugh with them like a friend, support them in their development about any issue like an older brother, inspire them like a coach, and be able to bring new ideas and concepts that help them to reflect on their lives like a preacher.*

Word of Mouth

Once the word gets out from members about the Brotherhood to their friends and other young men they know from their schools or communities, then everybody wants to be down. Whether they

They'll never count me among the broken men.

George Jackson

(printed on a Brotherhood T-shirt)

hear about our retreats, trips to the movies, or being hooked up with a free computer, our members are the best promoters of our organization. During recruitment we also use alumni and older current members to talk about what the Brotherhood experience has meant to them. This gives new recruits an opportunity to **hear about the benefits of The Brotherhood from their peers'** personal experiences. These alumni and long term members have gone through the program, come from very similar conditions as incoming members, attended similar schools, and know that Brotherhood is thorough, committed, for real, and that we walk the walk.

Filling the Void

It is well known that there is a pervasive lack of fathers in the communities in which we work; that over **75% of our children are raised without a father in the home**. While we know well that a woman can raise a boy into a strong man, as so many have done, we also know that during their adolescent years many boys crave male influence. This influence is often found in the wrong places - in gangs, drug dealers or slightly older peers who steer them wrong. Black and Latino boys are often seduced by gangs, by prison, by the temptation of being "hard", by the misguided allure of money and sex, by the belief in the alleged quick money of music, by the unlikely possibility of playing professional sports. We seek to fill this void and use the same methods that have helped gangs attract members, fraternities become attractive, or the street corner be seen as exciting.

We build a chapter that provides **opportunity for young men to connect**, to gain a sense of strength in numbers and of belonging.

Brotherhood **paraphernalia** helps to convey a sense of belonging. It is also appealing because it's well-designed, stands out and marks the young men as being part of something larger than themselves.

We **expose them to new possibilities** and positive experiences that are exciting, constructive and opens their eyes (i.e., plays and cultural performances, positive examples of Black and Latino men during profession days, our *International Study Program in Africa and Latin America*).

We help them to **expand their minds and follow their dreams** through using a curriculum that is geared toward them, that deals with their lived reality, and uses multiple media that engages their minds and spirits.

We offer **resources** that help them know we are there for them during tough times. We offer school or home counseling and legal representation. We identify job opportunities that put

money in their pockets. We use **Check-in** (at the start of chapter sessions) to listen to them and let them know that their lives and views are important and can help them overcome a feeling of hopelessness. We **connect the chapters to each other** during outings and retreats, helping them see they are part of an entire **network of support** that will love and protect them.

Too many men who work with Black and Latino boys and young men utilize an approach based only on toughness and discipline. Others go too far in accommodating negative behavior due to the difficulties the young men experience daily. Some do not uphold high expectations or standards. The language we use with our members goes a long way towards maintaining their involvement in The Brotherhood and the organization as a whole.

We seek to be **gentle, yet firm**; supportive, yet tough through combining discipline with love and providing **unconditional support and high expectations**.

We **respect their opinions** and talk to them as the intelligent young men they are. We express how truly interested in them we are by closely listening to their experiences and views on the world. Even when angry or disappointed with them, we speak with respect, showing them that our caring is unconditional.

We raise the bar, expecting that they will struggle to live more consciously and righteously, that they will not be perfect and that they will fall, but that, as we always tell them:

**The test of a man isn't whether he falls,
but whether he gets back up.**

Or as Brotherhood members asked to have printed on two different sweatshirts:

**A man who won't die for something
is not fit to live.**

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

My life is my message.
Mahatma Gandhi

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512 West 143 Street
New York, NY 10031
212.283.7044 fax 212.283.3700
www.Brotherhood-Sistersol.org