



T. McKenley

I approached a room clouded in dust, unable to see since there was no electricity. I had to rely on a household multi-purpose respirator to breathe properly. When I finally exited that living hell, the sky was darker than my skin color. I had thought this work was too dangerous and strenuous for someone 15 years old and physically unfit. Then I had to pull myself together and get used to it since I had nothing to do on weekends and days without school. It was a nightmare, only to escape work after the clock struck midnight.

I work for my dad's painting company H2M Propaint. There were days when I was challenged with new tasks that would make me use muscles till my head felt clouded and my body twitched uncontrollably like a cold breeze passed by me every so often. Other times, it would leave me in a daze, with my head pointing to the sky and my body unable to move, let alone twitch. Sometimes I wanted to quit because I wasn't fond of another day of soaking my clothes with the hot steamy liquid that would excrete from my skin every time my body was put to work. I desperately wanted to go back into an air-conditioned room with a blanket over my body, playing Brawlhalla on my PC.

My first job was at an old neighbor's house that needed her bedroom walls to be repainted. To repaint a wall, you have to remove the old paint, apply plaster, sand it, and then you can apply the paint. The old paint on the drywall had been there for decades. Although most of the time was, some of it was so loose that simply swiping your hand across the wall caused the old paint to crumble and fall to the ground, creating a dust pile. That created a problem because I would have difficulty peeling the paint off the walls. I spent what felt like days constantly scraping at dry flakey paint that would sometimes come entirely off, removing some of the actual coatings off the wall, and I was explicitly told not to damage the wall. My dad noticed my lack of work ethic and became furious. When I decided to use a floor scraper to remove the old paint, it would damage the wall, almost removing the dry plaster on the wall.

I wasn't overthinking it at the time, but it only created more work for us. In response to this, my dad barked with his fist clenched tightly. His eyes wide open, like what I had done was something unspeakable, "Ya bloodclat (basically the f word) idiot, why ya try to waste my time fa (why was I wasting his time), THINK, Tafara, and use your head; you can see what ya do nah go work." My eyes were wide open, except I thought my dad was crazy. Later, I realized he yelled at me because I failed to recognize that taking the easy way out wasn't always the best option, and I needed to work on my inadequacies. But something was still bothering me, grinding my gears; why did my dad expect so much from me?

I had an epiphany; my dad gave me the best life lessons. It's better to be committed to your ambitions, like the plaster, instead of the decrepit and easy-to-crumble old paint. That's when I started to value managing my time with my school work to complete it efficiently instead of cutting corners and summiting apathetic assignments. I also value communication and asking questions when I am clueless. Suppose I don't know something instead of waiting for the problem to automate. I found personal development worthwhile because I know the importance of discipline and education.



M. Barry

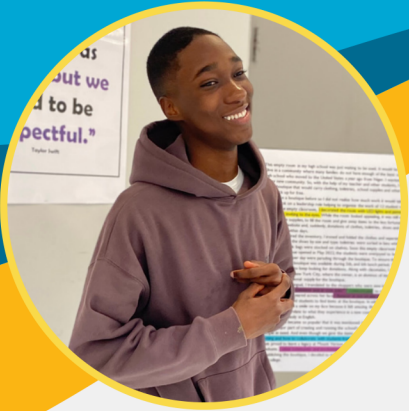
"At 16 girls should stop studying to get married," these are the words my aunt put in my head for sixteen years back in Africa. In life we often encounter obstacles in our lives where we must stand by our convictions and stand firm in our dreams. When we do this, it makes us braver and more eager to reach our goals, so much so that it almost becomes an obsession.

Personally, I have had several experiences that have led me toward my goal, but one motivated me so much that it changed my way of thinking and strengthened my desire to continue my education. The year 2020 was crucial for me to pass the national examinations in my country; this examination gives you access to High School without it I could not continue my education. In Guinea, where I am from, all students are afraid of sitting for this exam. The exam is not easy, so many students begin preparing for a year before and the emphasize that parents placed on their children achieving high scores could be stifling.

I started to study a year in advance. After studying for a month, I was met with serious complications in my life. In my country the traditions are strict; I would even say unfair to young girls who have dreams and desires to continue their education. I had recently turned sixteen and deemed eligible for marriage. In Guinea, families have a strong influence on the outcome of one's life and if the family obliges you to marry, you marry. My aunt was adamant that it was time to marry, but for me and my parents we were not so sure.

I did not want to squander my education and lose my childhood by getting married. From watching other classmates, I realized that if I got married it would lead to me dropping out of school. I would have to tend to my husband, home, and any subsequent children. I did not see that life for myself. I wanted to complete my studies. Me saying no was not enough for my aunt. Every day for months she would harass my mother and me. She would tell my mother that because she was my paternal aunt, she had authority over the family. She even enlisted the help of other family members. At first, I tried to ignore my aunt, but her persistence started to take a toll on me. I was extremely stressed; I could not concentrate in school, I stopped preparing for my exam, and eventually I got so sick that I stopped going to school.

After seeing the toll this situation had on me, my aunt finally gave up. However, she made it clear that she and the rest of my family would no longer associate with us. At the end of this ordeal, I only had a few months before the exam. By that time, 6 months had already passed without me attending school. Everyone was shocked by my return. They all thought that I was going to give up. Even my mom was worried about this exam because she knows that this exam is not easy. Despite all of this, I did not give up. I fought to pass my exam, because I wanted to prove that at all costs I could succeed. It finally seemed like my life was on track, but a few weeks before the test I became sick with malaria. If my health did not improve my hard-work studying would be in vain. Thankfully within a few days, I had finished my infusions and was able to take the exam. The results took two weeks to come back. Those were the longest two weeks of my life but when the results came back, I had passed. After that experience, I told myself that I will never be discouraged again. I will always fight for what I want in my life by what everything is possible.



M. Alou

"This empty room in my high school was just waiting to be used. It would be perfect for my plan. I live in a community where many families do not have enough of the basic supplies. I was a junior in high school who moved to the United States a year ago from Niger. I wanted to find a way to contribute to my new community. So, with the help of my teacher and other students, I turned that empty room into a boutique that would carry clothing, toiletries, school supplies and other items that my classmates could pick up for free.

I never ran a boutique before so I did not realize how much work it would take to plan and execute my ideas. I took on a leadership role helping to organize the work of 12 student volunteers. Once we secured the empty classroom, I decorated the room with LED lights and painted the tables so the room would look inviting to the eyes. While the room looked appealing, it was still empty. So, we commence to gather the supplies, to fill the room and give away items to the less fortunate. A posting was made on the school's website and, suddenly, donations of clothes, toiletries, shoes and school supplies accumulated within days.

Once we acquired the inventory, I ironed and folded the clothes and separated it by size and gender. Also, I stocked the shoes by size and type. toiletries were sorted in bins while notebooks, pens, erasers, folders and book bags were stocked on shelves. Soon this empty classroom began to look like Target! After the boutique opened in May 2022, the students were overjoyed to have a boutique in room 258. At least 20 kids per day were parading through the boutique. To ensure that students weren't skipping their classes the boutique was available during 5th, and 6th lunch period. We could not keep up with the demand and had to keep looking for donations. Along with classmates, I visited the Visionary Society store located in New York City, where the owner, is an alumna of my high school, and he blessed the school with additional supply for the boutique.

Because I am bi-lingual, I translated to the shoppers who were new to the country and only spoke French. "Bonjour comment puis je vous aidez" I communicated to one student, her eyes widen, and a beautiful smile appeared across her face. " Bonjour je suis un peu confus, je ne sais pas quoi choisir" and from there I guided students to find items at the boutique. In addition, I gave new students a tour of the high school. I had a smile on my face because it felt amazing that I assisted students at the high school because I could relate to what they experience in a new country and the difficulty of not being able to communicate easily in English.

The boutique became so popular that it was mentioned in the Journal News Newspaper. I am proud of being a major part of creating and running the school's boutique, because I was able to help so many people in need. And even though we gave the items away for free, I learned how to work in a team setting and how to collaborate with students from Bronxville High School.

I am proud to leave a legacy at Mount Vernon High School as the Boutique continues even when I graduate. I value community and involvement. I love helping individual in need. As a result of establishing the boutique, I decided to major in Business Administration and start another boutique at my college.