

From:

The Pact

Three Young Men Make a Promise

and Fulfill a Dream

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AND RAMECK HUNT

with Lisa Frazier Page

Unlike in high school, Sam, George, and I attended every class, did all of the assigned homework, studied together, and made good grades in every subject. I was determined to prove to myself that I belonged here. But I couldn't look too far ahead. I had trouble believing I would actually become a doctor someday.

Carla Dickson, the counselor who had interviewed us and recommended us for the program, seemed to know intuitively that many of her students felt that way. She offered encouragement the first day of class.

"You are doctors," she told us in her opening remarks. "You guys have to visualize yourselves as doctors."

It was not the first time Carla would anticipate what we were feeling and say just the right thing to boost our confidence. She taught a course called "Becoming a Master Student," which focused on basic survival skills: how to take notes effectively, study for tests, manage our time, dress for a job interview, and control our temperament. The assignments she gave all had purpose. In class one day, she instructed each of us to pretend we were getting a big award at a banquet—any award we wanted—and had been asked to give an acceptance speech. Our assignment was to write the speech and read it in front of the entire class. The exercise was designed

not just to work on our writing skills, but to help build our confidence enough so that we would feel at ease speaking before a room full of strangers. Subtly, she was working on our self-esteem.

Carla also gave us good practical advice to attract our professors' attention and show them we were serious: get to class on time, sit in the first two rows, and participate in class discussions. She even conducted role-playing exercises to help us learn how to negotiate with teachers and administrators to resolve potential problems. Carla arrived on campus early and stayed late every day. Sam, George, and I bonded with her right away.

As part of the program, the students occasionally attended health and diversity workshops that gave us a chance to meet and spend time with African-American doctors.

One weekend, we rode a bus to a farm in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, for a retreat. Most of us had never spent any time in the country, so we looked forward to the trip. The farm was spread over several acres, but it was set up for large group visits. Each cabin was equipped with bunk beds. The girls stayed together in one cabin and the guys in another. Breakfast in the dining room of the main house was awesome—homemade biscuits, grits, fresh eggs, and bacon.

During the day we met in a large community room for seminars on a wide range of subjects, such as drugs and AIDS education, exercise, and nutrition. For recreation, we played basketball and swam. One night, we walked along a trail through the woods, stopped at a camp, roasted marshmallows,

and told stories and silly jokes around a fire. There, the blackness of night was peaceful: no sirens, no gunshots, no need to constantly look over our shoulders.

The requirements of the summer program consumed every minute of our day, and we were not the least bit happy about that, especially in sunny, 90-degree weather when we ached to get outside and shoot some hoops, I complained endlessly. I had never studied so hard before, and I was unaccustomed to being monitored so closely and having so little free time. Soon, other students were complaining, too. As the program drew to a close, we concocted a plan to air our dissatisfaction.

Carla had asked us to create a bulletin board about the Pre-Medical/Pre-Dental Plus Program in the hallway outside her basement office. The bulletin-board project had become a sort of closing tradition. Each year, students tried to be creative in expressing their views of the program. When the ten of us met to discuss the project, we decided to depict ourselves as mental prisoners. We would draw pictures of students dressed in prison garb, standing behind prison bars under the name of the program. We excitedly planned the details of how to execute our little masterpiece.

But somehow Carla found out about our plans.

We were all in our dorm rooms late one afternoon when we heard her voice over the intercom summoning the students and counselors to the lounge area outside the third floor. She had never done this before, so we knew something was wrong. When we'd assembled, I took one look at Carla's face and knew we were in trouble.

"So, you think you're in prison, huh?" she asked rhetorically. We were busted.

"This is nothing like prison," she continued. "Your future is going to be brighter than bright. You just don't see it now. Because of this program, you're going to be able to make it through college with no problems. I know it's hard, but realize that you have an opportunity to make a difference in your lives."

She was looking at our faces as she spoke, but I had trouble holding my head up to make eye contact with her. It had never occurred to me that what we'd done would hurt her so much. She was angry, yes, but she was even more deeply hurt. Because she gave so much of herself to the program, she was personally offended by our plans. I had never seen her this way.

"The nerve of you guys," Carla fumed, "depicting this program by showing yourselves behind bars. Over my dead body!"

She stormed out, leaving us alone in an uncomfortable silence. Someone in the group had snitched, but we were too ashamed even to waste time trying to figure out who had done it. We just slunk back to our rooms.

Later, we decided on a simpler project. We hung a picture and brief biography of each of ourselves on the bulletin board.

Our class ultimately would become one of the program's most successful. Seven of us would complete college and medical school and become doctors, and another student would earn a medical degree, as well as a master's in public

health from Johns Hopkins University. Only two students would drop out of Seton Hall and transfer to other schools.

Sam, George, and I completed the summer program with A's and B's in all of our classes.

The program closed with a banquet the night before our final exam. I was one of two students who received a book scholarship for outstanding academic performance. A state senator presented the award.

Our keynote speaker, Dr. Francis Blackman, a pulmonary specialist who was president of the North Jersey Medical Society, emphasized the continued need for the Pre-Medical/Pre-Dental Plus Program. He said that the nation's health-care system is still a dual system in which African Americans, especially the poor, receive inferior treatment. As a result, he said, the health outlook for African Americans is worse, and our life span is still far shorter than that of white Americans.

My complaints about the program seemed to melt away at the banquet. Our parents were there, as well as all of the professors and counselors who had helped with the program. Everybody was celebrating us for doing well, something that was new for me. The banquet was like a pep rally before the big game. It left us motivated to face the next four years.

IT WAS THE FALL OF 1990, and Carla Dickson was attending the Black Issues Conference in New Brunswick when she heard an author who would change her life—and ours.

Jawanza Kunjufu, an education consultant, was discussing his series of books, *The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. He described how smart, energetic, and hopeful black boys enter school systems so inadequately prepared to educate them that the boys begin to lose interest as early as the fourth grade and are often lost to the streets by high school. He proposed mentoring as a solution and asked the men in the audience to stand. He admonished them to go back to their communities and become mentors to the black boys who needed them.

Carla was so moved by the workshop that when he'd finished talking she headed for the booth where he was signing his books. The crowd was so thick that, at no more than five

feet tall, she couldn't even hope to catch a glimpse of him. So she waited at the end of the line and prayed that his books wouldn't sell out before she made it to the table.

As Carla tells it, she lost track of time while replaying Kunjufu's words in her mind. When she finally made it to the front of the line, she bought a set of books and shook the author's hand. He wrote down her name and asked her to return to the table later to pick up the books. To fill the time, she wandered around the Ramada Hotel and faked interest in other exhibits for about forty-five minutes. She returned to Kunjufu's table, but he still had not signed her books. She attended another workshop, and by the end she was so tired that she nearly forgot to retrieve the books. People rushed by her as she walked slowly past all of the booths. Suddenly, she heard a man's voice behind her.

"Here are your books," he said.

It was Kunjufu. In her hotel room, she flipped open the cover of the first book and read the inscription:

"Carla, go out and save our black boys," it said.

The following spring, George, Rameck, and I showed up in her office for an interview.

She says that when she met George, she could tell that he really wanted to be a dentist and that Rameck and I were more skeptical. She could see that Rameck wanted to trust her and wanted to come to Seton Hall, though he didn't really know why. She knew right away that I carried a lot of weight, and she declares I took over, interviewing her.

But Carla says she liked us right away and immediately saw us as a unit. She feared that if one of us dropped out of the

program, she risked losing all three of us. She vowed not to allow that to happen, and she became our angel, guiding, protecting, and pushing us as we traveled blindly from the comforts and dangers of our old world through the challenging new ones at Seton Hall.

Carla planned every detail of student life in the Pre-Medical/Pre-Dental Plus program, right down to who would be roommates with whom. Her job was to figure out the weaknesses of the students in the program—whether those weaknesses were academic, social, environmental, or personal—and find a way to help us strengthen them. Her first move was to assign Rameck and me as roommates for the summer program, and to place George in the same suite but with another roommate across the hall. She says she didn't want our reservations to influence George. She figured if she could keep George excited, he would work on us.

Several times over the years at Seton Hall, I received a grade less than I thought I deserved in a class and complained to Carla. She wouldn't allow me to get by with just complaining. She persuaded me to make an appointment to talk to the professor to try to understand why I had received the lower mark and to make my case for myself. More times than not, her advice worked.

Soon I began hanging out in her office during my spare time. I loved talking to her. She would sit behind her desk and sometimes not utter a word. She would look at me and listen. Other times, though, she did most of the talking. But when she talked to me, she rarely judged, or preached, or gave an automatic list of steps to follow. She asked questions: "Well,

what do you think you should do about that?" "What is your gut telling you to do?" She helped guide me to an answer that was already inside me.

Carla didn't try to change us, and that was important. Rameck, George, and I wanted to be able to enjoy college without suddenly looking or sounding like boys who went to prep schools all of their lives. We liked our 'hood gear: baggy jeans, boots, and rap music. Still do. Carla accepted that. She always seemed to know how to reach us and just what to say. Of the three of us, I grew closest to her, perhaps because I was the most needy emotionally.

But Carla could be tough, and she wasn't the least bit intimidated by three teenage boys who sometimes resented being pushed so hard. She would plant her tiny frame in front of one of us, stand toe-to-toe, and tell us to our faces when she thought we were being selfish, lazy, or just plain dumb. And guess what? We listened. She always came across as real, not like a snooty professor with a bunch of fake, impractical wisdom. More like a big sister, passing on life lessons learned firsthand. The door to her office was always open, and she gave us her home telephone number.

After my first couple of years of college, I grew tired of the countless hours of studying and never quite feeling like I belonged, even with Rameck and George constantly at my side. One night, when I felt especially dejected, I called Carla at home and began to vent my frustration.

As usual, she listened while I contemplated whether to drop out of college. Then, she asked:

"Sam, what do you have to return to?"

That stopped my spiral into self-pity because the truth was, if I left college I had nothing but trouble waiting at home.

"This is about more than you," she continued. "There are kids behind the gates in your neighborhood, wanting to be doctors. They need you to do well for this program to continue to get funded. You have to pave the way for them."

Carla had grown up in East Orange, two blocks from Newark, with a mother who was a teacher and a father who was a Tuskegee airman. She was the youngest of three girls—her sisters are a teacher and a pediatrician—and was especially close to her father. She attended public schools. As an adult, she once attended a workshop that focused on the longtime disparities between suburban schools and those in the inner city. Carla was shocked and furious to learn, for example, that the science lab at her alma mater in East Orange contained burners that were obsolete and had not worked ten years before she'd even arrived at the school. Meanwhile, schools in the suburbs had all the latest equipment.

In the neighborhood where she was raised, poor, working- and middle-class black families all lived on the same block. Neighbors knew one another and helped one another out. Poor children growing up in homes without daddies got to talk regularly to the hardworking men in the community: the black pilot, construction worker, or teacher who lived across the street or down the block. It saddened Carla that her generation of black professionals fled the neighborhoods of their youth for the suburbs, leaving behind such poverty and hopelessness. She often talked to us about the need for more black professionals to stay and fight for the inner city. And to this

day, Rameck and I still live in neighborhoods like the ones where we were raised, and George lives in the same apartment where he grew up, a block from where the old Stella Wright Projects once stood. They were demolished recently and replaced with low-income town houses as part of an inner-city revitalization project.

Many of the practical lessons that Carla brings to her survival-skills class stem from her own experience as one of the few black students at Drexel University in 1975. She ultimately transferred to Seton Hall, closer to home, and earned a bachelor's degree in business management.

I rarely talked to anyone about my family. Some things I never even told George or Rameck. They had their own burdens. Whenever a family matter bothered me, I just shoved it into my inner "box." But when I hung out in Carla's office, she asked questions about my family. I was reluctant to talk at first, afraid of what would happen if I let her see all the ugliness in my box. But she seemed genuinely interested in me. She talked me into letting all the hurtful things out, talking about them, dealing with them for the first time. I feared what she would think of me once she had seen everything, and I was afraid to face the pain I knew was bound to surface. But Carla helped me realize that my family and life experiences have made me the individual I am, and that I have no reason to feel ashamed.

One night during my freshman year, I received a frantic call from home. The family was gathered at University Hospital in Newark. My oldest brother, Kenny, had been beaten in

the head with some type of heavy blunt object—I heard it was a golf club—during a fight. He had lost a lot of blood, was unconscious, and would probably not survive. I rushed to his bedside and was devastated by what I saw. His bandaged head was hugely swollen, and his face was black and blue. He lay so still that he looked frozen. I couldn't stand seeing him that way and rushed out of the room. I had been angry at Kenny for years for drinking so much and causing such a disturbance at Moms's house. But he was my brother. I didn't want him to die.

I immediately began feeling guilty about being in college. None of my brothers or sisters had been given such an opportunity. What was so special about me? I might not have been able to prevent the fight that left my brother nearly dead, but if I had been working instead of going to college, I could at least have been helping Moms out with the bills. I was the one who had held our family together. My rep in the neighborhood had helped to protect them. When I left for college, I felt I had abandoned them. When I started college, Moms began collecting discarded aluminum cans off the sidewalks and streets during her four A.M. street-cleanings to sell to a company that made money by recycling. This just proved my point and made me feel worse. She sent me her small profits, which made me feel special and loved but also unworthy. With Kenny's injury, all those feelings of guilt and responsibility and worthlessness came rushing back.

The next morning, I went to see Carla.

"Listen, you can't feel like you're the reason this hap-

pened," she told me. "You had no control over this. You can't live your life forever trying to take care of your family and monitor your brothers and sisters."

She helped me plow through the pain to see that it was best for me to stay in college and complete my education.

Ultimately, Kenny recovered, though he was left paralyzed on his right side. He is confined to a wheelchair and lives in a home for the disabled. At first, it was difficult for me to visit him there, and I turned to Carla many more times. But the amazing thing is, Kenny seems to have found peace and purpose in his life, and we have developed the close bond I always wanted. He no longer drinks. He participates in the daily recreational activities at the center. And get this: he's even talking about going to college. He says watching me pursue my degrees inspired him.

Carla understood that the students in her program faced many distractions outside of school and needed more than just academic enrichment to survive the academic world. Whatever the need, she tried to meet it or find someone who could.

At the end of our freshman year, Carla refused to allow Rameck, George, or me to go back to our old neighborhoods for the summer. She didn't want us to return to the influences of old friends or the other dangers there. I had shown her a letter that one of the guys who had taken part in the armed robbery wrote me from jail. He accused me of ratting them out, and he threatened to "get" me. She arranged for us to live and work on campus during the summer.

When scholarship, loan, and grant money fell short for one of us, which seemed to be every semester, Carla scram-

bled to find other potential resources. When Rameck and I unexpectedly became the first students accepted into a new program that allowed us to enroll in the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Piscataway a year early, Carla stepped in to offer more emotional support to George, whom we had to leave behind.

Before Rameck and I left to begin medical school, the two of us and George visited Carla at her office to give her some pictures we had taken during our college graduation ceremony. She opened her purse and stuck the photos inside without paying much attention to where they landed. When she made it home, she took out her purse to look at the pictures again. She realized then that she had placed them inside the small burgundy leather Bible she carries with her. The pictures had landed on the Thirty-first Psalm, which ends this way:

O love the Lord, all ye his saints: for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer. Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.

She took that as a sign. The good Lord would protect and keep us the rest of the way. Then, as my mother had done so many years earlier with the curly black braids she retrieved from the barber's floor after my first haircut, Carla placed the graduation photos back inside her Bible and closed it.

She has kept us in there ever since.