

My Leadership Story

I was born in the 1980s in Northern California, in the heart of the Bay Area. For the first nine years of my life, I lived in a loving, middle-class, two-parent home in Berkeley, California, with my moderately well-educated parents. My father began his career as a forest firefighter before transitioning to a well-paying role with Chevron in Richmond, California, while my mother worked as a dental assistant in East Oakland.

As an only child, I was known for my talkative and energetic nature. I attended a small, predominantly white elementary school in the Berkeley hills, where my teachers described me as engaged, well-behaved, and an advanced learner. I cherished my early years, filled with friendships, family vacations, and spirited holiday gatherings with relatives who lived just a few blocks away on Mathew Street.

However, when I was around nine years old, significant changes began to reshape my world. My father was laid off from his job at Chevron, and my mother was forced to work long double shifts—from 8 AM until 10 PM—which coincided with escalating, intense arguments between my parents. In the midst of this turbulence, I often sought refuge at my aunt and uncle's house, a nearby safe haven where I could escape the chaos at home.

Within a year of my father's job loss, our family lost our home. My parents became estranged, and my mother and I moved into a small, cramped apartment in a challenging area of Oakland. This period marked a dramatic transition, as I left my familiar environment at Oxford Elementary in Berkeley and enrolled in Washington Elementary in Oakland—a school predominantly attended by Black students and serving a community with fewer resources. The shift was jarring: I suddenly found myself in an environment where the physical surroundings felt unsafe, and I encountered conflicts at school simply for "talking" and "dressing" like a white boy. Meanwhile, my father's unpredictable presence—oscillating between appearances and disappearances due to bouts of depression and drug addiction—further unsettled my world.

During these years, I gradually disengaged from school. With my mother working long hours, I became what people referred to as a "latchkey kid," spending long hours unsupervised before and after school. My routine became a cycle of walking home with friends, throwing my backpack aside, and playing in the streets until my mother returned. This pattern continued until I was about 12 years old, a time when many of my peers began to face the harsher realities of street life, such as drug dealing and encounters with the juvenile justice system.

Despite these challenges, I had two key advantages that set me apart from my peers. First, I had just been accepted into a respected art school, thanks to my unexpectedly strong performance on the admissions test and my natural artistic abilities. Second, I was fortunate to have an aunt and uncle who were both dedicated educators. My aunt, a special education teacher, and my uncle, a seasoned high school principal, cared

deeply about my future. When reports began circulating that I was associating with the wrong crowd, they stepped in—especially my uncle, who made it clear that things had to change.

At a critical juncture, I was presented with a choice:

1. Spend the summer with my father in St. Louis, and then decide if I wanted to stay there.
2. Return home with my mother, but only if I committed to engaging in positive activities and improving my academic performance.
3. Or face the alternative of being placed in a group home, as my mother could no longer bear the added stress.

I chose to spend the summer with my father in St. Louis, where he had recently undergone a transformation as a born-again Christian. Despite the challenges he had faced, I recognized that his journey toward redemption could offer valuable lessons. I returned to Oakland after the summer, determined not to abandon my mother, who had sacrificed so much for our family. I resolved to pursue positive endeavors and work diligently to improve my performance in school.

Yet, the road ahead was not easy. At the beginning of my second year at my new school—a place that had once held promise as a "good school"—a parent-teacher conference turned into a pivotal moment in my life. During the meeting, teachers suggested that I be placed in special education, listing reasons that essentially lowered their expectations for me. As I sat there with my mother, I witnessed her cry for the first time, a moment that filled me with anger and determination. I declared, "I believe you are saying these things not because I'm not smart, but because I haven't been trying. Give me a chance, and I will show you what I'm truly capable of."

That declaration was a turning point. Starting in the seventh grade, I committed to working harder than ever before. I was fortunate to have the support of a remarkable teacher, Judy Hirsch—a passionate educational activist from New York—who stood in stark contrast to the others. While many were quick to lower expectations, Judy believed that my potential should be met with even higher standards. Having taught in Israel and Palestine, she introduced me to the complex dynamics of racism and internalized limitations. She made it clear that some people wished for me and others like me to fail, but she believed in my brilliance and encouraged me to prove them wrong. Although Judy passed away from cancer during my first year at Rutgers Law School, her unwavering support and belief continue to inspire me.