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Pay it Forward

A student's remarkable journey from crime-ridden neighborhood to law school

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"The first time I saw a person killed, I was 7 years old," William Dudley, L'11, recalls. "A group of guys were shooting dice in front of my house in Portsmouth, Va., and a fight broke out after one of them lost a bet. One guy owed the other guy five dollars but didn't have the money, so the other man shot him in the chest. He died right there on my front porch." That 7-year-old boy is now getting ready to graduate from the University of Richmond School of Law.

Dudley's vivid memories bring him back to a painful childhood. "My neighborhood was filled with drug dealing, violence, prostitution, all the ills of a poverty stricken area," he says. "My mother, bless her heart, never went on public assistance. She always worked, but that meant she was never at home and I was left to take care of my younger brother and myself, and that's when the trouble started."

Dudley's mother knew her son was bright and curious. She bought him lots of books and that, Dudley says, started his "love affair with reading." But the stress of living with violence made him aggressive. "By the time I got to junior high school I was the sort of guy who didn't start trouble, but if I thought you were trying to hurt me I would get you before you got me," Dudley says. "It was survival of the fittest."

When he got in trouble as a teenager his mother sent him to live with his father, a U.S. Army staff sergeant stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C. Dudley resented his father's new wife and her children, and wound up getting sent back again to his mother, he says, "even angrier and more withdrawn." When he was 15, Dudley met Tracy Hendricks, the woman who would change his life. "Tracy," says Dudley, "was my saving grace because I was still getting in trouble but she saw the goodness in me."

After more trouble at home and at school, Dudley joined the U.S. Army and after two years he left with an honorable discharge but couldn't find a job. "I started hanging with my friends from the 'hood," he says. "They were involved in drugs and everything else and I got in trouble with the law. When I went to jail for a weekend, I made my decision: This is it — I have to change my life."

Dudley enrolled in Tidewater Community College, married Hendricks, had a son, William, and graduated with honors. He then earned a B.S. in finance and an M.B.A. from Old Dominion University, also graduating with honors. He worked for a plumbing company, bought a janitorial service company and later worked for the Department of Defense. But Dudley wanted something more. "I always wanted to be an attorney," he says. "I got the idea when I was very young, watching reruns of the "Perry Mason" TV show. I thought, 'This guy is awesome and I want to be like him.'"

As he began thinking about law school, Dudley's old demons came back to haunt him. "I didn't know if I could practice law because I had been arrested once," he says. After doing research, he learned he could apply to the governor to have his civil rights restored. "I wrote to Gov. Tim Kaine explaining my past and why I wanted to become a lawyer, and he changed my life with the stroke of a pen," Dudley says. "Nine months later, I was at Richmond law."

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Dudley never imagined that, two years later, he would be sitting in an upper level Constitutional Law class taught by Kaine. Dudley waited until after the last class and then, he recalls, "I went up and thanked Gov. Kaine for that stroke of the pen that changed my life."

After graduation, Dudley has a clear plan. "My goal is to return to Portsmouth, Va., and hang up my shingle in my own law office to help the lower-income people of the disadvantaged neighborhood that I came from," he says. "I didn't come to law school to find some big job to get rich. I came to return to my neighborhood and let them know that, if I can make it through, they can make it, too. I want to be the type of attorney who is empathetic. I want them to understand that I have been where they currently are, and let them know that they can be where I currently am."

When he speaks of role models, Dudley says he admires the leadership of people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Barack Obama. But, he says, "when I think about heroes I see people like my mother and my grandmother who worked hard with such little recognition so that I could be where I am today. I am so appreciative and humbled by their struggle."

Dudley says law school has been "a mental marathon," but he has done well and received the prestigious Marks and Harrison Scholarship.

Dudley's advice to other students? "Be the genesis," he says "Be the beginning. I'm the first in my family to receive a professional degree. I truly believe our destinies are written for us, but we have to take action to follow our destiny. You have to have more than a wish — you have to have a burning desire. And despite your circumstances, economics, family background, or any other excuse, you cannot let that hold you back. You have to have the burning desire to move beyond that and overcome the obstacles. I am doing this for my family and for my community."



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