

3



## INVESTMENT

# MODELS OF SUCCESS

OPENING ESSAY | **DOUGLAS ROOT**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTHA RIAL

When a mentoring rescue team of young, black, college-educated men was unleashed to connect with students in one of Pittsburgh's most troubled schools, some dust was kicked up...

...And some big dreams were sparked, and some futures look brighter.

The problem is  $6 \div 2$ .

Actually, that is the small problem that has led Sean Means to understand the magnitude of the Big Problem. Its scope is revealed in a study session with a soon-to-be 10th-grader in one of Pittsburgh's most academically troubled public high schools. The student is puzzled—his face scrunched as he blurts out a series of answers, each of them a guess, and each guess wrong.

"How about  $9 \times 8$ ?" Doesn't know.

"How about  $5 \times 3$ ?" Silence.

A week later, 30-year-old Means is sitting in a Starbucks in Shadyside. It is a two-mile drive and a 1,000-light-year cultural shift from the struggling teen in the summer program at Pittsburgh Westinghouse. The mammoth Classical Revival building that once served thousands of students now draws about 530 sixth-to-12th graders from some of the poorest neighborhoods. The racial breakdown: 99 percent African American, 1 percent other.

That statistic helps explain why Means, African American and a college graduate from Atlanta whose career path has taken him from Washington, D.C. to New Zealand, now is sitting in a Pittsburgh coffee bar fretting over one lost student.

"Look—he's a good kid, but he just doesn't know it," Means says, thumping long fingers on the table for emphasis. "The foundation is not there, so how are we going to put him into algebra and expect anything close to success?" The discussion flows from one struggling student and then to another, and eventually it turns to the struggling system. Thousands of city students are deep into their high school years and also are deeply deficient in mastering basic math and reading comprehension.

Coffee drinkers nearby might assume Means to be a passionate teacher or guidance counselor. Neither of these titles is on his resumé, and yet in the span of a year and a few months he has done parts of these jobs and many more.

In the fall of 2011, Means and nine other African American men, all with college degrees and heading into professional careers, were embedded at Westinghouse in an unprecedented foundation-city school district program that was developed, its architects say, as a classroom-level rescue of students entangled in the Big Problem.

In the more precise language of education policymakers, the Big Problem is the achievement gap. Students on the wrong side of it largely come from neighborhoods mired in multi-generational poverty. Black males, even those not part of low-income households, have historically dominated the achievement gap group.

In Pittsburgh, testing data last year showed a widening of the black/white learning divide after several years of progress in closing it. Results also showed an increase in the socio-economic gap. Education, business and foundation leaders have reacted to the mind-numbing complexity of the problem with an array of preventive strategies designed to catch vulnerable students in their early school years. There are few lifelines for those in higher grades who are drowning academically.

In February 2010, as severe budget cuts were taking hold in the district, staff at The Heinz Endowments asked Dr. Linda Lane, superintendent of the 25,000-student district, to identify a critical need that was not being addressed. She pointed to the achievement gap and the dearth of black male role models.

The response was the Heinz Fellows, a two-year program in which the 10 were identified through a cross-country network of educators, counselors and experts in development programs for young black men. The Fellows were envisioned to be real-time models of success: the mentor-guides working exclusively with black males in and out of the classroom each day. In return, they would receive a salary, benefits and enrollment in a master's degree program in education at Duquesne University.

After a school-year-and-a-half of operating in Westinghouse and in projects attached to the school, the Fellows Program has been given soaring marks for making inroads with individual students. Each Fellow has a mentoring caseload of 25–30. “Imagine what this means to a mom in one of these struggling neighborhoods, knowing what passes for male role models in her son's world,” says Stanley Thompson, director of the Endowments' Education Program.

The rippling effects from the program on administrators, teachers and other professionals in the district are only beginning to be assessed, but many of those have led to positive changes.

“We worked carefully to ensure that these young men would not be add-ons to the system but part of the regular daily routine,” says Endowments President Robert Vagt. “This is the first time that people who do not report through the system have been allowed to work in classrooms and become stakeholders in what happens each day. I give the district a lot of credit.”

That is not to suggest that there hasn't been some turbulence. At the beginning, a single-gender academy plan for Westinghouse unraveled over a threatened American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit, and the Fellows mission expanded to cover young women. “Time management is the big issue,” says Philadelphia

THE FELLOWS WERE ENVISIONED TO BE REAL-TIME MODELS OF SUCCESS: THE MENTOR-GUIDES WORKING EXCLUSIVELY WITH BLACK MALES IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM EACH DAY.

native Matt Tansey, a Pennsylvania State University graduate. “There are all types of meetings, and the master's program is so absorbing, but we are all pulled toward the students.”

In fact, the constant juggling of responsibilities and the inevitable limitations on student time led one from the group to resign at the end of the first year. Reacting to that months later, several Fellows say the experience gave them a keener understanding of how important resiliency is in the position.

While he's not the oldest, James Sudduth, 36, is known as the “senior Fellow,” a largely self-appointed title that others in the group enjoy over-emphasizing when they address him, observes that the Fellows are most effective with students when they share personal stories of resiliency. “When you make that connection, you want to do everything you can to strengthen it,” he says.

Sudduth remembers having had life-changing mentoring from a University of Pittsburgh professor. Others in the group refer to one great teacher, one coach, one pastor. Some have shared how they developed resiliency through experiences with poverty, teenage fatherhood and stints in the criminal justice system.

While the Endowments will be doing a detailed evaluation of how well the program is addressing students who are making up learning deficits at the level of  $6 \div 2$ , a larger piece will look at how the system-wide solution to the achievement gap is helped by factoring in the number 10. Meanwhile, a second class of Fellows is being recruited.

“These students know that no other school has this situation—and they look at the Fellows as special—a very rare resource,” says Vagt. “They also should know that, in placing the Fellows in their school, all of us are saying, ‘You are worth every bit of this huge effort, and you are capable of achieving what these Fellows have achieved.’” *h*



## EMMANUEL KWAME AFRIFA

AGE 23

HOMETOWN  
THE BRONX, NEW YORK CITY

EDUCATION  
SWARTHMORE COLLEGE,  
B.A., RELIGION WITH BLACK  
STUDIES MINOR, 2011

### Where you were and where you are:

Born and raised in New York City — the Bronx. My parents emigrated from Ghana; I am named for a Ghanaian ancestor. Now living in Wilkinsburg.

**Who/what helped you get to where you are now:** Growing up, my family and cultural orientation was truly African — very different from African American kids and Latinos who were the majority in my school system. I had trouble adjusting. In the third grade, I was way behind in every subject, and when the school officials told my mother that they were going to hold me back, it was the first time I had ever seen her cry. I was determined not to hurt her, so I went to summer school and worked extremely hard. I did so well they gave me a shot at fourth grade. So my mother is first in the big influences that have shaped my life. Another was a college prep program, Liberty League, which involved visits to college campuses. That's when I saw Swarthmore for the first time and realized what that type of education could do for me. I had something to go after.

### One big thing that prepared you for the

**Fellowship:** It was a shock on that campus with the minority student population at just 10 percent. Another black student introduced me to the community of black students that supported one another. From that point on, I felt welcome and I believed I could make it. I became very involved with the Achieving Black and Latino Leaders of Excellence group at Swarthmore — eventually was elected president. One of the projects was mentoring African American males in Chester, Pa., near the campus. The percentage of black male students graduating from high school was very low, and college attendance was minimal. That was when I first started realizing that the mentoring we were doing — it wasn't just about helping them stay on track with their education; it was about helping them manage life in general.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:** The idea for this program is wonderful. As Fellows, we have the ability to grow professionally,

and the students have an opportunity to get on a better educational track and grow from the personal attention. But I was a little unprepared for this challenge because although I had experience mentoring and tutoring, it is very different from being in a classroom and having to engage a whole class continuously. I wish we had more time to develop some relationships so that these students are ready to hear what we have to say. In the orientation, there were high expectations that we were going to change the whole face of Westinghouse, almost as if we were superhumans. And we, as Fellows, put those expectations on ourselves, too. In the second year, it's all about being just human and recognizing what is possible right now.

**One thing I've learned:** I see the difference between teachers who get involved in the communities that the students are part of — and those who don't. When the kids are comfortable with you in that regard, that's when you are a true role model. I watch workers at Westinghouse — not teachers — who take the same buses as the students, and they talk to them. They have relationships, and it makes a huge difference.

## SHAWN BOLDEN

AGE 26

HOMETOWN  
HARLEM, NEW YORK CITY

EDUCATION  
MONROE COLLEGE, B.A.,  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE, 2008

*Shawn shown on left.*



### **Where you were and where you are:**

Born in Harlem and raised there by my grandparents. There were addiction issues in my family, and I was considered an at-risk teen in high school, but I made it to college. I share my personal story with students who have had similar challenges to show them they can make it. Now living in Wilkinsburg.

### **Who/what helped you get to where**

**you are now:** My grandparents were into their church, and they were all about being responsible in the community. I was caught between two worlds — the home life where I was experiencing all of these high moral principles, and the street life where bad activities bring fast money. So in my teenage years, I got arrested. I was literally at that fork in the road. I saw how dehumanized I was in the criminal justice system. It was at that point that I got introduced to Brotherhood/Sister Sol [a Harlem-based nonprofit dedicated to 8- to 22-year-old youth development], and mentors there helped me realize that going to college could be more than just an idea.

### **One big thing that prepared you for the**

**Fellowship:** One of them would be my experience as a parent. I have a 3-year-old daughter who is very playful and active. There is a lot of trial and error in figuring out the best way to connect with her. She is trying to be her own person, and there is testing of limits. When she does something wrong, I notice that if I am firm but the delivery is calming and respectful, she listens better. I get the same reaction from Westinghouse students. Being a parent, you understand the parents of the students, and — this is a tough one — the students who have to play the role of a parent at home.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:** This job isn't a Kool-Aid drinking contest — it's not all that sweet. But the experience here has helped me grow professionally and personally in ways I never thought possible. I spend most of my time as a mentor. I do a lot of tough love because these kids are a real hard sell — more than in New York. The level of apathy and low self-respect is very high, and I think it's tied to a lot of personal history where people have not cared about them.

You have that attitude coming at you long enough, and eventually you make it part of who you are. And I am referring to the whole community being responsible for this. Some of the parents are very apathetic.

**One thing I've learned:** We have to change the rites-of-passage culture with young black men. One thing that really made me sit back and think, "Wow, this is what we're up against? This is what these students think is cool?" On my first day with the 12th-grade boys, I could tell the trust wasn't there. But what got their attention ... solidified their trust instantly ... was when I read them one of my poems that had a reference to my experience being locked up. I consider it one of the worst periods of my life, and they think being incarcerated is this tremendous rite of passage. The next step is that getting shot and surviving is an even higher rite of passage. Not a good situation.



OMAR ABDUL  
LAWRENCE

AGE 37

HOMETOWN  
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH,  
B.A., AFRICANA STUDIES AND  
MUSIC, 2001

**Where you were and where you are:**

Grew up on Pittsburgh's North Side. Graduated from Allderdice High School, so I'm a product of the city's public school system. From my younger years through college, I was always involved with community programs. And my career has followed that track — community programming and outreach development. Now living in Franklin Park.

**Who/what helped you get to where you are now:**

My mom has a strong background as an artist and has been very involved in the cultural aspects of the African American community. She instilled a love for these art forms in me, and they have been big factors in my development. As early as middle school, I was in the Kuntu Writers Workshop at

the University of Pittsburgh. Another big influence was a rites-of-passage program I went through later. And hip-hop had a major effect. Part of my experience is as a hip-hop artist.

**One big thing that prepared you for the Fellowship:**

Professionally, it would have to be the Children's Window to Africa, which was a program founded and managed by my mother, Valerie Lawrence. It was a very exciting cultural activities program directed to the public housing areas around Pittsburgh. That was my life for about seven years — moving from facilitator to program development to project director and program director. My focus was on using the cultural pieces in the program to guide individual and community development.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:**

When I first read about the program, my immediate reaction was that this type of opportunity is so rare, and it has the qualities of a dream job. I am constantly studying and so excited about what I've been able to learn. My idea of a dream job is not one that requires little effort;

it should mean that you are working really hard at exactly what you want to do. Oh, and for sure we are working hard — 40-plus hours in the school and then our own graduate work. Hundreds of hours later, here we are, and it has been very tough, but it has really helped to be in a group of really sharp, impressive guys. It's a big benefit to the students and to Pittsburgh that we have out-of-town guys in the mix.

**One thing I've learned:**

The best relationships to help students learn happen organically. They can't be hurried. They are about getting to a place where you can communicate what they have done well and what areas you have concerns about. Students are in the process of learning how they learn best, and they are looking for guidance, but it has to be at their pace.



## DEWAYNE POWELL

AGE 40

HOMETOWN  
EAST DETROIT, MICHIGAN

EDUCATION  
MOREHOUSE COLLEGE,  
B.A., SOCIOLOGY, 2008

**Where you were and where you are:**

Born and raised in East Detroit. My father died when I was 18 months. Have two younger sisters whom I helped raise when my mother became ill. Now living in East Liberty.

**Who/what helped you get to where you are now:**

My faith is woven into my DNA. Each of my grandparents was a pastor, and my parents and aunts were in ministry. The other influence would be Morehouse College. I opened the acceptance letter on the very first day of a new job that I had started in Detroit. Keeping that job or going to Morehouse, it wasn't even a question. Every day I am reminded of some part of my educational experience that confirms I made the right decision.

**One big thing that prepared you for the Fellowship:**

I think it would be tenacity. No matter what happens, I keep moving and don't stop. I don't mean that I'm trying to act like some kind of superhero. I am hardly that, but at the end of the day,

if I am doing what I believe God expects, it's going to be OK and I just move forward with confidence. I've dealt with some tough transitions. I was 8 when my mother suffered a nervous breakdown, and I had to take over caring for my two younger sisters. I was the adult at home, and it didn't match up with school, so I dropped out. But I went back to school and got my GED ... and I pushed myself toward college. I've dealt with sexual abuse and a lot of other issues. You just keep moving.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:**

The Endowments has developed a program that could be on the cusp of dramatically changing the way city students react to public education. It is such an excellent thing even to have tried this. What drew me was the opportunity to combine mental health with life skills and daily education. I discovered 90 days into the program that there was a lack of professional courtesy and communication to the Fellows on the part of some in the district, and it made me angry. I think that there are a lot of big chief wannabes [in the school system] and very few dedicated Indians. Frankly, we Fellows are

going to walk away from this with degrees, professional experience, job offers. Clearly, professionals in the system — they're not suffering. The children and their parents ... they're the ones who will be terribly affected if we don't get this right — if people don't start communication from a "we're all on the same level" mentality, versus an "I want to be the head" mentality.

**One thing I've learned:** There has to be a holistic approach to urban public education, or we're not going to be successful. When our children walk into their classrooms each day, they are not coming in as blank slates. Some are stressed because their parents are arguing all evening about lack of money. Others have the burden of babysitting younger siblings because the parent or grandma is out working a second job. Some haven't eaten since lunch the day before. If part of the money that is going toward alternative programs could be re-directed back into the public system to do a holistic approach, I'm convinced we would see a great turnaround.



## SEAN MEANS

AGE 30

HOMETOWN  
PORTLAND, OREGON

EDUCATION  
MOREHOUSE COLLEGE,  
B.A., ENGLISH, 2007

### **Where you were and where you are:**

Born in Portland, Ore. Family moved to Atlanta suburbs where sister and I went through school. My father is an engineer; my mother is an accountant. Began college career at American University, then transferred to Morehouse. Spent summers working for Walt Disney Corp. and studying abroad. After graduation, traveled to New Zealand where I helped with their Beijing Olympic bid. Upon returning to the U.S., I joined Obama for America. Now I live in Shadyside.

### **Who/what helped you get to where you are now:**

Growing up, I played several sports in grade school and golf in college. Through athletic competition, I learned the value of self-discipline, practice through repetition, and showing solidarity. My mother was always there for us, a typical soccer mom. It is because of her that I recognize the importance of commitment to quality time. As far as employment, working for Disney taught me the significance of a smile and the importance of showing both guests and co-workers that they are appreciated. These intangibles still guide my daily practice and approach to life.

### **One big thing that prepared you for the**

**Fellowship:** Obama for America, 2008, serving in Field Operations and on the

transition team staff in foreign aid. I was just an assistant — the coffee guy. But who cares when you are a couple of doors down from Vice President [Joe] Biden's office! I had never been part of such a politically enlightened talent pool. We all were eager to work into the dead of night for a cause that was bigger than ourselves; it was incredibly stressful but also exhilarating.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:** No question, the program is a rare opportunity. Anytime you better yourself through education, it's a blessing. And then there is the experience we are getting in a city school district and in a classroom. And I believe we have made some solid contributions to the district — administrators, teachers and most importantly the students. And I had an idea what the challenges would be. I sat with my sister and reviewed test scores and other problems in the school situation. Yet I remained optimistic.

One issue that I have is that on an average day there are so many things that need attention, and while some may seem insignificant, these small things play a large part in the bigger picture. Furthermore, in order to transform a school's culture, there must be a long-term investment in the community that surrounds it.

As a building, we worked for weeks to prepare for the PSSA; everyone from our faculty to our students were on board. Unfortunately, the scores were not great — we fell short of our goals. This was a humbling experience; I learned that great change cannot come from a single cram session with overly ambitious goals. Closing the achievement gap takes time and buy-in by all parties involved.

**One thing I've learned:** It's a top-down approach; every person from the central office to the cafeteria staff plays an important role in creating a safe and welcoming environment where students are eager to learn. Around the world, in places ravaged by war and poverty, children walk miles to go to school because they understand that through education comes opportunity. Our students must have such an approach to school. Once we can change the mentality of those we serve, anything is possible.

**Where you were and where you are:** Born in Atlanta but raised in Baltimore. Attended a middle school in the public system that had so many problems, it was taken over by the state. But I was very fortunate to get a scholarship to one of the top private high schools. I knew early on that college was the goal, and I wanted to do something with history. Now living in Monroeville.

**Who/what helped you get to where you are now:** I was very involved in sports. I played football, ran track, played basketball and baseball. My mom made sure that education came first. I had to keep a progress report just for her. She went back to get a nursing degree as I was starting school. She tells the story about the time when I was in kindergarten and she was trying to study and couldn't remember the material and she started crying. I patted her on the back and told her we'd get through it together. She chased her dream. I watched her become a nurse while raising three kids. I knew the sky was the limit.

**One big thing that prepared you for the Fellowship:** I definitely had a support system in my parents, my brothers, coaches. If something didn't go the way I'd planned or there was some big disappointment, they would say, "Well, you have five minutes to feel bad for yourself. Then you need to pick yourself up and do something about it." I still hold on to that, and it's something that I've taken with me into this program and that I've tried to instill in the kids at Westinghouse.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:** I knew that it was going to be a lot to take on, but the benefits are so great. Westinghouse was a lot like the middle school I attended and the high school my friends went to. My stepfather said that if you work your hardest in a program like this at the beginning of your career, you will work smarter, not harder later on. The biggest challenge, though, has been time management. There is the 50-55 hours each week at Westinghouse, and then the graduate courses. Each of us has had to figure out our own ways to balance the student work and our own studying, and now it's doable. All the theories that we learn at Duquesne, we can immediately put into practice with our students. There's an incredible amount of learning going on here.

**One thing I've learned:** It's easy to underestimate the impact we have. I was in the back of a classroom one day getting a feel for the class. Afterward, I decided to have a conversation with this one kid. He told me a lot about his life and what he was going through. Something must have



## TRAVIS ROBINSON

AGE 23

HOMETOWN  
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

EDUCATION  
MOREHOUSE COLLEGE,  
B.A., HISTORY, 2011

happened in that moment for him. After that, he would come and ask for advice, and I did some tutoring. He later told me that he had come to look at me as a father figure. I don't know what I did to make him see me that way. It's shocking sometimes how much these students are taking in; how much they cling to us for attention and direction, even when they might not show it.

# OLAVÉ SEBASTIAN

AGE 27

HOMETOWN  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK CITY

EDUCATION  
HAMPTON UNIVERSITY,  
B.S., ACCOUNTING, 2007

**Where you were and where you are:**

Raised in Brooklyn and graduated from the public school system. My dad has been an elementary school teacher for nearly 30 years. My mother is a social worker but used to be a substitute teacher. My two older sisters are involved in nonprofit management and after-school programs. Living now in Wilkesburg.

**Who/what helped you get to where you**

**are now:** I am fortunate to have my family, and my father has been a strong influence as a parent and a teacher. I was a tyrant in middle school, and one day he told me he would have no more of it. He made sure I wore clothes a certain way, asked about my friends and did not condone me being disrespectful. I began to focus on school-work and matured. I was my middle school valedictorian and, in high school, the only male student in the top 10 of my

senior class. I graduated college in four years. None of this would have been possible without the guidance of my father.

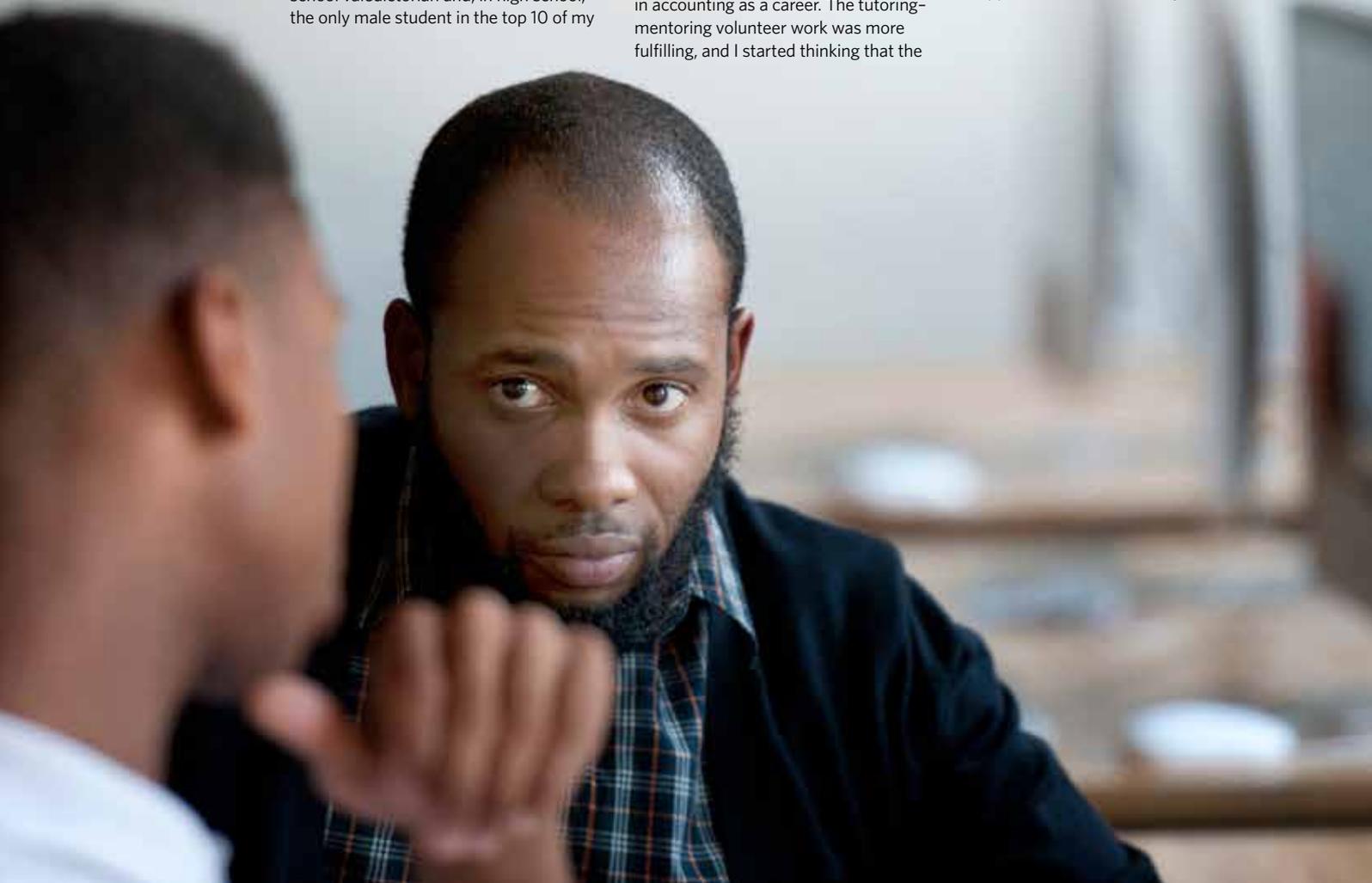
**One big thing that prepared you for the**

**Fellowship:** My work as a tutor and mentor for a group of young men in the rites-of-passage program at The Brotherhood/Sister Sol program in New York. And connected to that is my experience in the Bro/Sol writers' collective, The Lyrical Circle. I was able to lead workshops that engaged students at the Harlem Center for Education where I was an after-school English instructor. One of my greatest moments was when a student I had worked with for months to address language and character issues stopped telling other people to "shut up," and began talking in a more respectful tone. It might seem like a small thing, but it meant that a lesson was learned about character and conflict resolution.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:** The Fellowship opportunity came through my mentor [at Brotherhood/Sister Sol]. I was between jobs at the time and knew by then that I didn't want to continue in accounting as a career. The tutoring-mentoring volunteer work was more fulfilling, and I started thinking that the

black male achievement work at the center of the Fellowship really seemed to fit where I wanted to go. I had no idea what Pittsburgh was like. There were no expectations, and I just assumed it would be great. When I got here, it was clear that plans had changed. The program wasn't thought through as well as it could have been, and we've had to make a lot of adjustments, but now there is progress.

**One thing I've learned:** Culture and history are important. Without these things, you won't have a strong sense of community, and to be successful, a school has to have a functioning community. I think it's starting to happen in the building [Westinghouse]. When we Fellows had our first tour, one of the first things pointed out to us was the wall of photographs of prominent Westinghouse graduates. It's an amazing display. Students walk by it every day, but I don't think they have absorbed what it means—really understanding what the culture of this school has produced—because of conditions that have persisted for a few years. Baby steps, right? But we're leaning more toward that appreciation. It's on its way.





## JAMES SUDDUTH

AGE 36

HOMETOWN  
WILKINSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH,  
B.S., COMPUTER SCIENCE, 2000

### **Where you were and where you are:**

Raised in Wilksburg. Graduated from Wilksburg High School. I'm the first in my immediate family to get a bachelor's degree. Run my own IT consulting business.

### **Who/what helped you get to where you are now:**

Every opportunity I've had has been through the grace of God, and that has come from strong family support, some good teachers and a special mentor in high school, Dr. William Thomas, who was a professor in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. One day, when I was in high school, he came up to me in front of the building when a disagreement I was having with another student was escalating. He started talking to me about making wise decisions. That started a relationship and a whole new world opened up. I always wanted to go to college, but he helped make it a reality. He and his colleague prepared me for the SAT, introduced me to different types of music, took me out for great discussions and connected me to influential people. He could have taken an interest in anyone, but he said, "There's something in you and I don't want to see it go by the

wayside." That's why I believe so much in the Fellows Program because I know firsthand that it works.

### **One big thing that prepared you for the Fellowship:**

A few years ago, I helped produce a documentary film aimed at reducing gun violence in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. As part of the program, we met with some of the stakeholders: an assistant district attorney, medical examiners, police officers and many African American young people. I know it helped to deepen my understanding about issues that only urban teens deal with on a regular basis.

### **Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:**

I remember when we first started with the program, we would have strategizing sessions at The Heinz Endowments in what we called the War Room. We were making these big plans and challenging one another about who was going to have the most students qualify for The Pittsburgh Promise [scholarship program]. Then we went to [Westinghouse] for the first time and started looking through the transcripts. Seeing the grade point averages, so many of them significantly below the necessary threshold for eligibility ... it was rough. We all realized it was going to take significantly more than an arm around the shoulder and a pep talk.

**One thing I've learned:** These students need to see real-life examples of people just like themselves who have used education as the bridge to a better life. The only successful people many of my students see are on TV in sports or entertainment. You can tell them that success is achievable and even back it up, but they aren't internalizing it unless they see someone who has actually lived it. I was at a football game with two of my mentees — one graduated last year and had made it to college. The other is one of my seniors, and he was having this attitude: "I'm from Homewood, and I'm not going anywhere past Homewood." And before I could say anything, my college mentee said, "I'm from Homewood, too, but watch what I do. I'm going to get through college and start my own business." How powerful was that — right? He said it, not me. A future Fellow in the making!



## MATTHEW TANSEY

AGE 24

HOMETOWN  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

EDUCATION  
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY,  
B.A., RECREATION, PARK & TOURISM  
MANAGEMENT, 2011

### Where you were and where you are:

Raised in North Philadelphia. My mother is an educator, and my stepfather, when I was growing up, was an educator. My twin brother and I are the oldest of six. Now living in Wilkinsburg.

### Who/what helped you get to where

**you are now:** In high school — it's called Mastery Charter now — it was the principal who made a difference. He is from Africa. I was in trouble a lot and would end up in his office. Instead of ripping me a new one, he talked to me as if I were an interesting person. He would change the subject to reading — offer me a book he thought I would be tuned into. "Who is this guy?" But I read those books. At Penn State, I had a multi-cultural adviser who coached me through a lot of the culture shock. I wouldn't have made it out of college without her, and she was the one who convinced me I could do this Fellowship.

### One big thing that prepared you for the

**Fellowship:** Whatever passion I have for this ... comes from high school experience. I had been assigned to my neighborhood high school — one of the worst. My mom came home with a notice about an open house ... It was advertised as a college preparatory charter school. There were lots of activities you could do after school — physical activities to computer science to nutrition and life skills — and every teacher headed up a club. The most powerful thing was the culture. From day one, we were treated as the best students in Philadelphia. We felt part of something that was bigger than any of us, and its future depended on what we did every day.

**Fellowship — Concept vs. Reality:** When my Penn State adviser described the Fellowship and said she was going to recommend me, I was intimidated. So much was expected in that job description. But it is an awesome opportunity. The hard part is time management. I have this passion in me, and it is doing as much as possible with the kids. But the master's program is so absorbing, and then there are administrative responsibilities and so many meetings. I feel, sometimes, that the deeper I get into the work, the further away I get from the kids.

**One thing I've learned:** It's October, and I have 40 kids in a classroom. It's a period when they are just supposed to catch their breath and ask questions or talk to me about personal issues. This new student introduces himself and asks if I am the teacher. I shake his hand, tell him my name and explain that I am a Heinz Fellow. Then he asks, "What are we learning here?" I'm startled by the question, but I try to explain that this is advising time. He asks again, "But what are we learning? Is there something I can learn?" I don't have an answer. He and I ended up bonding ... but it was a lesson for me that this work has to be more than just providing guidance and resources. We have to pass on knowledge. Many of these students are showing up every day, and they desperately want to learn and get on to the next thing.