

“Their story *is* my story”

by **Kathleen Wilson Shryock**

Several times a year, Benny Cooper travels to an orphanage in Oxford, North Carolina and talks to the young tenants about college. He teaches them about making applications, searching for scholarships, and problem solving. But most importantly, by staying in touch, Cooper shows them that he cares. “It is personal to me,” he says. “I am hands on, because their story is my story.”

Cooper is a 2008 graduate of Wake Forest University (Winston-Salem, NC) and is currently a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, PA). On the surface, Cooper’s collegiate experience appears typical, and his academic success has been outstanding. In reality, Cooper’s background makes him an on-campus exception.

As a child, Cooper lived in an abusive home where poverty and drug addiction were the norm. Finding food, water, and shelter could be a daunting task. Cooper’s ever-present love of learning branded him as “different” in the eyes of family members and staying in school became a challenge. As a teen, he was placed in foster care and, eventually, an orphanage.

It was at the orphanage and at J.F. Webb High School (Oxford, NC) that Cooper began to be influenced by a network of supportive mentors. “I remember the first time that a teacher told me I was good at something,” he recalls. “Knowing that someone else actually saw me as successful had a profound impact on me. I recognized that I could develop meaningful attachments with people who cared. Because I hadn’t grown up with a supportive network, it was a whole new conversation—a new vocabulary.”

Fueled by fresh relationships, Cooper began networking with others who could help him understand the process and navigate a path to college. He reached out to guidance counselors, spent evenings on the Internet, and watched his peers in action. He requested information packets and began applying for scholarships. “The scholarship applications and essays forced me to think about what I wanted and to articulate my dreams for the first time,” he says.

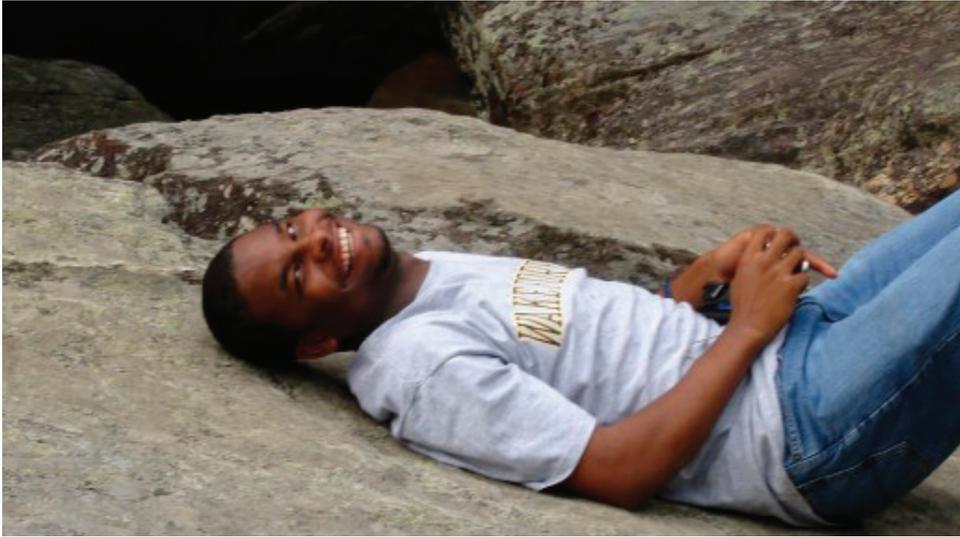
Cooper’s efforts paid off in 2005 when he was accepted at Wake Forest University. He was also named as a recipient of several notable scholarships including the Gates Millennium Scholarship which rewards outstanding minority students and the Horatio Alger National Scholarship, an award given to high school seniors who have overcome life challenges while excelling in academics. In addition, Cooper received an “I Have a Dream, Too!” Challenge Grant from Bob Tryanski Presents.

Tryanski notes that Cooper’s grant application told a story of incredible resilience. The combination of initiative and personal commitment along with the ability to cultivate long-term relationships with mentors was impossible to ignore. “So many people shut down when they get stuck. They get overwhelmed by the scope of their problems and focus on their limitations,” he says. “Benny’s story was different. He had the courage to take a step away from what he knew, because it wasn’t working. Instead, he stepped forward and said, ‘I need help. I’m willing to do the work, and I won’t let you down.’”

In 2008, Cooper graduated with a B.A. in Sociology and began a teaching fellowship at the Bronx High School for Law and Community Service in New York City. Gradua-



“I remember the first time that a teacher told me I was good at something,” recalls Cooper, pictured here in eighth grade.



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tion not only brought Cooper a new assignment but also a revelation. “My guiding thought throughout my life turned out to be a myth,” explains Cooper. “I thought I would go to college and my life would restart. I would have a clean slate. But I discovered that I can never erase what happened. I do have a different life now, but there are still implications from my past.”

This realization directly impacted Cooper’s work with students in the Bronx. His ability to empathize with disadvantaged young people gained him insight into their lives not only in the classroom but in their homes and on the streets. “The dropout rate is so high. There is an obligation for educators to talk about it and to help kids see other options,” Cooper says. “It is important not only to teach content but also to talk about how kids are making sense of life.”

In 2009, Cooper returned to school and is currently working towards a graduate degree in learning sciences and policy. The Horatio Alger Association again recognized Cooper’s potential by naming him the 2009 Dennis R. Washington Achievement Scholar.

Cooper believes that the presence of his Horatio Alger mentor has provided him with ongoing emotional support and has been critical to his long-term success. Carrie Blewitt, spokesperson for the Horatio Alger Association notes that the organization’s mentoring program was established as a proactive means of addressing a need. “The alumni association created the program as a way for alumni to stay in touch with scholars and offer them support and guidance throughout their time in college and beyond,” she says.

Cooper notes that, in the absence of familial support, sustained communications from his teachers, mentors, and supporters like Tryanski and Hannah Britton of “I Have a Dream, Too” have helped him to stay grounded. “It’s so important for policy makers and scholarship providers to understand the importance of the human element. The attrition rates are high among kids from

foster care, and much of it is because of a lack of relationships,” he says. “Kids need someone to provide emotional support. Contact from my mentors showed me that someone cared.”

After completion of his graduate work, Cooper hopes to be an educator and can envision himself as a principal, teacher, or researcher. Wherever his journey leads, his future will have ties to the past. He hopes that amid the glow of his success, people will understand the impact of his yesterdays and an evolving tomorrow that is still being shaped.

Tryanski believes that Cooper’s resolve serves as a valuable lesson and that this same determination will enable Cooper to tackle other obstacles that come his way. “Vision, courage, and persistence can be powerful when combined with great mentoring and the willingness to contribute beyond yourself. I know Benny will continue to affect the lives of others in significant ways because he had the vision, courage, and persistence to say, ‘I have a dream, too.’”

For Cooper, academic success represents just one step on an important journey toward change. “In policy, when people are brought up to the standard or ‘normalized,’ it gives the impression that they’ve made it, but you can’t just label someone as a success one day and end it there. With me, I will always be a work in progress,” he says. “Part of my process is an obligation to highlight the issues that are often dismissed or misunderstood with this demographic of young people. I need to be part of a process that motivates students and provides them with sustained support. I need to be part of the solution.” ■

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