

Building Dreams

Alton Fitzgerald White shares how education and the arts helped him achieve his dreams

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Alton Fitzgerald White, an award-winning Broadway star, grew up poor in subsidized housing in Cincinnati. As the youngest of seven siblings, with an alcoholic father, it wasn't an easy childhood. But he found solace in the arts and the classroom.

"The arts and education literally saved my life," he said.

Alton was a very shy child but from an early age he had a dream of acting on television or singing on the radio. He looked to idols like television star Flip Wilson, singer Glen Campbell and others.

"I didn't have many people I felt I could trust growing up," he said. "I had two companions — radio and television... Listening to the radio and watching television, I fantasized about performing."

Education also played an important role in his young life. Some of the people he could trust were his teachers. He remembers sitting in the back of the classroom with the other students whose last names started with a 'W' and biting his tongue when the teacher asked a question.

"The teacher would put a ques-

tion up on the board and I wanted to answer, but I was too shy and I didn't want to show off," he remembers. "Thank god for my teachers. They knew I was shy and they'd call me out, 'Alton you know the answer.' They let me know that it was okay that I loved learning and that I was smart."

He remembers that some of his teachers would ask him to stay after class and help them grade papers. For some students this would be punishment, but Alton loved the attention and validation. "My teachers reminded me that whatever I was going through, I didn't have to go through it alone."

His life changed when he was introduced to musical theater. "My education and the arts started to come together," he said. "They all put me on a path to achieve an impossible beyond impossible dream."

From his humble beginnings performing in school plays in Cincinnati, Alton eventually achieved his impossible dream and performed on Broadway. He starred in many shows, most notably "The Lion King" where he played a record-

breaking 4,300 performances as King Mufasa.

While some people may have burned out after so many performances, Alton said he gained a deep sense of gratitude. He was grateful for the hardships he had overcome and for those who had helped him along the way. He also learned to see his role and his work as service and something that was bigger than himself.

"A big part that has changed my perspective on life and my career is service and redefining what service means to me," he said. "I see service as a gift. Service reminds me that what I have to offer is a gift and it's my responsibility to take care of it."

This message is especially powerful for school board members and administrators whose work and service impacts so many but may not always receive the recognition it deserves. As Alton said, the work may not always be easy but it's important to remember the impact it has and how it can change other's lives.

"Making a difference — that quest is worth it." ■

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