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Antioch man who overcame tough circumstances leads students by example



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ANTIOCH -- An East Bay man who was incarcerated as a young person turned his life around, and now he's guiding at-risk kids toward their own paths to success.

Shamawn Wright is afraid of heights, but mustered the courage to go to the window to enjoy the panoramic view of San Francisco from the top floors of the LinkedIn office.

"It's in a comfortable space and having this beautiful view, it's amazing," Wright smiled.

He is not here for himself. The field trip is to open the eyes and minds of 90 Antioch teenagers he brought with him.

Wright partnered with LinkedIn to show students what it's like working in the tech world because if they can't see it, they can't imagine themselves in it.

"A lot of our students, especially those that come from marginalized black communities, a lot of times they become captive to their environment," said Wright.

The Oakland native who grew up in Antioch is exposing students to a view of the world he lacked as a kid.

"My father, he was in prison; my mother struggled a whole lot, whether it was mental health, drug abuse, growing up in low-income communities" Wright remembered. "For me, I was always trying to find myself as a young black male in this society with no father figure, with no positive black male role model."

After serving seven months in juvenile hall, something clicked inside his teenage mind.

"So the first thing I realized is that I had to take accountability of my life," he explained. "I had to take ownership of my life."

Wright went to UC Davis on a football scholarship, then moved on to graduate school.

Today, he's scheduled to earn his doctorate in educational leadership from San Francisco State University in 2024.

He also founded the nonprofit [Bridge Builders to the New Generation](#) in 2019. Its aim was to reach 350 at-risk middle and high school students in Antioch Unified School District a year with mentorship, academic and college-prep support.

Programs range from college and company tours to summer and art camps.

"Creating a program where we could do stuff like this, take kids places where we could support them one-on-one, was my biggest dream," he told the teens at the LinkedIn outing.

During that tour, students dreamed about careers, learned about resumes, and sketched out plans for their future.

Ania Stallworth is a junior at Deer Valley High School.

"I want to go to college for either singing or drawing, but the realistic goal is going for early childhood development," she said.

Johnnie Hines, the nonprofit's director and a longtime friend of Wright, says he leads by example.

"A guy that went from a foster home, now getting his doctorate degree. He's showing them that if he can do it, of all people, they can achieve whatever they want. I think he's the biggest inspiration for them," Hines said.

"The biggest thing that brings me joy is for my students to find their own peace and happiness in this world," Wright said.

So for building a bridge of hope for the next generation of young people, this week's Jefferson Award in the Bay Area goes to Shamawn Wright.

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Sharon Chin is a general assignment reporter who also profiles Jefferson Award winners for KPIX 5 Eyewitness News. Since she joined KPIX 5 in 1997, Chin has reported everything from fires to features, from politics to perspective pieces, but she feels a special sense of pride bringing viewers the stories of Jefferson Award winners. She herself feels inspired as she shares the stories of our community's heroes.



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