



CHAPTER SIX

Turning Dreams into College and Careers

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ALIKE SIDIBE was born in 1997 in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Africa, his father's native land. His father moved to America a week after Malike was born, and Malike and his brother moved with their mother to Guinea, her birthplace. He didn't see his father again until 2008, when his dad returned to Africa for a few months to visit. In 2010, the family reunited in the Bronx. "When I came, I didn't speak English. It

took me a while. I'm still struggling, still learning. It was a whole new challenge to learn how to make friends and learn how to approach people from different cultures that I'm not used to.

"I went to eighth grade at a Catholic School in the Bronx named Angel of Mercy. I'm Muslim so it was kind of weird. But it was a good experience. I graduated from there and then went to Liberty High School. And I stayed there until I graduated."

In high school, Malike acquired an entry-level Nikon SLR camera because he wanted to take good photos for Facebook and other social media. His interest in photography grew into passion once he discovered NYC SALT, a Pinkerton-supported nonprofit that uses photography to expose underprivileged students to visual arts careers. (When asked what SALT stood for, founder Alicia Hansen told *People* magazine, "As much as I wish we had a clever acronym, it's really a metaphor for our desire to use digital photography to flavor and preserve the lives of inner-city teens in New York City.")

Malike encountered SALT after he decided not to ditch school one day. "It was the day before Halloween and I really didn't want to go to school because I

Malike Sidibe's journey from Africa to America brought both frustrations and new opportunities.

knew my teacher wasn't going to be there . . . but then my friend called and said come to school because we have something to do after school."

It turned out his friend wanted Malike to meet a substitute teacher who had worked as a photographer. "So I started asking her questions and she told me about all these programs that do photography. SALT was one of them . . . and it happened to be the one closest to my school."

After school that day, he walked to SALT's office and met program director Adam Chinitz: "It's funny, the class was already full and they weren't accepting new students but Adam was kind enough to let me join."

Malike originally thought SALT was just another afterschool program which "you go to once a week and just talk about photography. But it ended up being something more. They helped me get into college. They have helped me with a lot of stuff . . . If I hadn't joined SALT, all I'd do is hang out with my friends. It would basically be no life. But then I joined SALT and they helped me get freelance jobs. If I needed money, I'd ask my mom. Now my mom is asking me. SALT has helped me get all these jobs and internships . . . I never thought I'd be able to take care of my little brothers, but now I'm able to at least buy them gifts from time to time. I took my little brother to Chuck E. Cheese's, and he was really excited. He spent the next two days talking about it and I just started thinking, if my substitute teacher had never told me about SALT that would have never happened."

Malike now attends New York City College of Technology and dreams of transferring to Parsons School of Design and perhaps pursuing a career in fashion.

CHEYENNE PALACIO-MCCARTHY, an 18-year-old from Flatbush, Brooklyn, who began life in foster care, credits a loving adoptive family and Legal Outreach, a Pinkerton grantee, for helping her realize what she could become.

"I was about eight when I got officially adopted, but I was in my adopted family's home since I was three. My mother has always told me, 'You were adopted.' Nothing was kept from me. I've thought about looking for my mother, but, you know, I don't know too much about where she might be because she was an alcoholic drug addict. I'm just happy that I didn't have to grow up around that."

Cheyenne landed in a large supportive family and attended a well-regarded charter elementary school in downtown Manhattan. And though she had what she calls "behavioral problems" in middle school, she applied for and got into the Brooklyn High School of the Arts, where she studied musical theater.

It was in the process of applying for high school that she learned about the Summer Law Institute, which is run by Legal Outreach—a nonprofit that prepares kids for success in school and in life.

The Summer Law Institute "was a chance for me to . . . be a mini law student, to dress in professional clothing, and be placed at different law firms around the city. You would learn about mock trials and the day to day law . . . We had tests every week. . . . So just starting this program, in the summer of eighth grade, we were taking exams on law; and you had to get an eighty-five percent or above for all these



Cheyenne Palacio McCarthy's exposure to New York's legal community opened her eyes to possibilities she had never imagined.

exams. Then at the end of that summer, you would participate in a mock trial. . . . They spoke to us about the College Bound program, and I decided to join because any program to better prepare you to go on to college is awesome. They told us that it was going to be a lot of work on top of your school work and I thought that was going to be a challenge in itself . . . but it was definitely something I was interested in."

Legal Outreach introduced Cheyenne to a world she had never imagined: "When you take a student out of a Brooklyn school and bring them into the seat of a law firm, that's something outside of our social zone. You take a child out of a community where they aren't offered these opportunities and you give them something. So a program like this . . . I think it is a great honor. It's life changing."

Cheyenne decided to attend Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. During a presentation at Legal Outreach, Hampshire representatives "spoke about how passionate their students were and how [you] can basically study anything that you want." Because the school didn't obsess about grades and also cared deeply about social justice, "I thought it would be a great place for me."

As for life beyond college, Cheyenne dreams of starting an educational nonprofit that would educate underprivileged students from around the world in a setting "where they will be able to sleep and eat for free."

AIEYLA SANTAELLA is only 19 but has shouldered adult responsibilities for some time—working several jobs while studying theater at LaGuardia Community College in Queens and also pursuing a dance career. “I was born in the Bronx. Growing up, it was my mom and me and my older brother. My dad was in my life until I was three...I suffered through domestic violence in my family. Eventually my mom kicked my dad out. He moved to Puerto Rico and got married, and I didn’t hear from him until I was about fourteen or fifteen. He came back to New York and wanted to reconnect, but it didn’t really work out.

“Mom grew up in Puerto Rico and when my brother got diagnosed with cerebral palsy she had to come to New York to get better hospitals and better care for him. Then I came along and it was even harder. There were [big] hospital bills. My mom was working twelve hours, six days a week in a pharmacy as a cashier. Basically, we struggled a lot. We lived with our aunt for a little bit. Sometimes, my mom only had two dollars in her pocket to get a hot dog and soda.”

Their apartment was a few blocks from the Madison Square Boys & Girls Club, a Pinkerton grantee that became a refuge.

“I started dancing at six years old at the Boys and Girls Club. It was, ‘If you want to go to dance, you have to do all your homework.’ That’s how my mom raised me: you have to work for everything. You don’t just get handed anything. And that’s just how we grew up, all of us.”

Dance helped Aieyla Santaella emerge from her shell and become a better student.



Aieyla believes that the discipline of dance had a powerful and positive impact on her life and school work: It “helped me with my memory in school. I’m able to look at something and remember it. It’s like picking up choreography. Dance helped me socially. I went to a performing arts high school and my freshman year, I was very quiet.

“When I dance, it’s something else. . . . It helped me come out of my shell. It helps me express the things I can’t in words. To be on that stage—it’s beautiful. Even now it’s still teaching me [new things]. Hip hop is very rough, and now that I’m in the business, they are telling me to dance more girly. I don’t ever dance girly except when I’m in a tutu or something. And that’s a problem girls are having in hip hop now; you have to find your [femininity], your girl in your hip hop. They don’t want a girl who can dance like a boy. They have a boy for that. So if you’re a girl, dance like a girl, especially for a video. That’s how you audition.

“I’m the first person in my family to go to college. I’m going to graduate. My brother only went to school for like a week. My dad didn’t even finish high school, and my mom, she began college then got pregnant with my brother and dropped out. I’m the first one.”

“I honestly don’t know who I would be without the Boys and Girls Club. I wouldn’t have a job if I didn’t know the club. I’m a group leader. I take classes. I’m in a dance company, but I wouldn’t be dancing [without the Boys and Girls Club]. I wouldn’t even know what my dreams or what my aspirations would be without the club. I don’t even think I would know how important it is to have a goal or want to be something.”

In 2013, Aieyla won the Madison Square Boys & Girls Club Youth of the Year award.

ANTAEUS TURNS-ASHCRAFT, 25, a Harlem native who works at Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, carries herself with the grace of a figure skater, which she is. “I was born and raised in Manhattan, born in a birthing center, actually . . . My mom had a midwife on 92nd Street.”

Her mom is African American and her dad is of Persian, German, and Israeli extraction. Antaeus was raised by her mom. “My dad left when my mom was about seven months pregnant and I actually met him for the very first time when I was twenty.”

Her mother is a fashion designer educated at the Fashion Institute of Technology: “She costume designs for plays. She’s done some personal stuff, wedding gowns. She’s also a professor. She’s taught courses at a few different colleges. She has a master’s in English.

“Education was always important in my family. She always said it wasn’t a matter of ‘if’ but ‘where’ you are going to college. I remember when I was twelve, I wrote myself a note and said the next time I read this, I will have gone to college. And my mom just found it. . . . She gave me the box and I found the note.”

When Antaeus was six, her mother enrolled her in Figure Skating in Harlem, a program that aspires not just to teach girls how to skate but how to have a successful life. Sharon Cohen, the founder and executive director, became a second mom to Antaeus.

“She is my mentor. She’s the one who gets behind me when I’m not doing what I’m supposed to do. She’s just a great model and a great woman.

“I remember my first year, I was six years old, this is when there was no office or anything, and my mom said she would help. We bought leotards and skirts in the clearance section and bought Elmer’s Glue, glitter. My mom took them to the local laundromat and dyed them, and those were our first costumes.”

Like all the afterschool programs that Pinkerton supports, Figure Skating in Harlem has a strong academic component. And as important as skating became to Antaeus, school always came first. Sharon [would] say, ‘If you aren’t getting B plus-es, you aren’t getting on the ice. What is important? Is it the education or being in sports?’ To Sharon, it’s always school. The sport, the extracurricular, is a privilege. If I really love to do that, then I’m going to stay on top of my studies. It’s about self-discipline. This is what I have to do to get from point A to point B.”

Antaeus attended River East Elementary School in Harlem. “It wasn’t your typical public school. Every Thursday we went swimming, we had cello lessons. We had a pottery class. So I loved school.”

After River East, she attended The Children’s Storefront, a charter middle school in Harlem: “It was very hard fitting in a lot of the time. Kids were like, ‘What are you? Are you mixed?’ . . . I used to get teased about being black and then I wasn’t black enough. So I’ve always had issues with that.”

Attending High School for Dual Language & Asian Studies was an altogether different experience: “We went to the public school fair and we saw this Asian guy [advertising] this brand new school. My mom told me to take the flier... I got into the Asian school and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. My school was ninety-eight percent Asian; there was me and one other black person, and I’m mixed race! Even though there is a stereotype about Asians being nerdy, it was not a bad thing... Because everyone else is studying, that’s what I was doing. We didn’t even have detention! No one got suspended because everyone followed the rules.”

The crush of high school work and other activities meant that figure skating sometimes became a chore: “At times, I didn’t always want to do it.... [Mom] said, ‘No, you’re going to finish this. Look how many years you have invested in this already. We’re going to see this through until the end.’

“I remember my last award ceremony, going up and getting The Cup of Life [award for completing the program]. I still have all my trophies. It was one of the biggest ones you could get—not just in size, but in recognition; to know that I was a founding member of this amazing organization and someone was acknowledging me. And I was very fortunate, I got a full scholarship for my bachelor’s degree and I don’t have any loans from that. And it was all Sharon and my mom, and my extended family, and my mom’s friends. They got me to where I am.”

Antaeus earned her B.A. at St. John Fisher College in Pittsford, New York. She went on to earn a master’s degree in urban planning and economic development from Long Island University, Brooklyn, but not before experiencing a setback. While working on her master’s full time and also working full time, Antaeus suffered through months of headaches and dizziness before she was diagnosed with



The skills learned in figure skating transferred to every other aspect of Antaeus Turns-Ashcraft’s life.

multiple sclerosis, a condition which is now under control with medication.

“What I’ve realized is do what you can while you can. Tomorrow is promised to nobody. You never know what can happen. It just goes back to staying focused and motivated, things that Sharon and my mom have taught me my whole life.”

HERNAN CARVENTE sports the well-tailored look of a confident young professional befitting his status as a program analyst at the Vera Institute of Justice. But Hernan has not always been so professionally presentable. Much of his early life was spent in society’s shadows; and it is his duty, he believes, to help others into the light.

The son of two undocumented immigrants, Hernan was born in Metropolitan Hospital in Manhattan. When he was two, the family moved to Atlitxco, in the state of Puebla, Mexico. “All there was were dirt, horses, and chickens,” recalled Carvente, who also remembers a familial backdrop of liquor and violence: “Most of the males in my family have had a lot of issues with alcohol. . . . At one point, my mother was beaten by my grandfather and my father in one day.



Hernan Carvente learned that help and determination can turn even the most dire circumstances around.

When he was eight, the family moved to Queens. “By the time I was 12, I started drinking heavy liquor [and] started acting out, not going to school . . . By the time I hit high school, I had a girlfriend and I was all into being in love, and thinking about being with this girl long term. I ended up cutting school and doing a lot of things because of this girl. By then I was already hanging out with some gangs at Thomas Edison [High School in Queens]—Crips, Bloods. And there were a few other Guyanese gangs. By the time I went to Flushing High School, you had the Latin Kings, Patrias, Sureños—the gang that I ended up joining.

“Around March 2008, I got jumped by Bloods and was literally put into the hospital. I ended up spending a whole month at home recovering. My mouth was wired shut. . . . I lost a lot of weight. I came back to school a month later with the wires off my mouth, thirsty [for] revenge.”

“I ended up taking an order from my gang, which was to go after our main rival gang . . . and kill however many members we could find in retaliation of them killing one of our members. I ended up shooting a rival gang member three times with

the intention of taking his life away. The offense happened May 18th, 2008. I got arrested June 12th, 2008. I was taken out [of school] in handcuffs.”

Hernan had just turned 16. He was told he would not see his parents unless he either confessed or implicated someone else. Fearing retaliation against his family if he snitched, he confessed to buying the gun and being the shooter: “I had no lawyer present.” Hernan was sent to Brookwood Secure Center, a youth prison located in the Hudson Valley region of New York State. “I ended up getting into custodial maintenance—the library, kitchen; and [one day] someone said, ‘I’m going to get my GED.’ And the staff started laughing. And I said, ‘I’m going to get my GED too.’ And [someone] said ‘No, you’re too stupid to get your GED.’

“My ego hurt when he said that.” He took the courses and passed the GED exam on his first try. He was then accepted into the Brookwood College Program, which allowed him to earn college credits before his release in June 2012.

“I walked out of the program with fifty-four college credits—close to an associate’s [degree]. . . . And when I came out, John Jay accepted me; but because I had been off the books for four years and my parents were undocumented, FASFA [the Free Application for Federal Student Aid] was giving me a hell of an issue. I was looking for jobs and running to and from John Jay trying to figure this stuff out.” He was also interning at the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem and at FACES NY, a Harlem-based nonprofit established to assist people impacted by HIV/AIDS.

“Trying to figure out my life at that point was difficult. School wasn’t guaranteed. Jobs were just denying me left and right. These internships weren’t paying at all. I had a daughter . . . and I didn’t want to take money from my father.”

His search for a way forward took him to College Initiative, a Pinkerton-funded program that helps young people embroiled in the criminal justice system. “It was [great] to have that support, but I think the biggest [benefit] was when, months later, College Initiative reached out and said, ‘We can pair you with a mentor at John Jay.’

“They paired me with John Bae who now works at the College Initiative. When I met him, I saw this Korean dude with tattoos all over him, and I thought, ‘What is this dude going to teach me?’”

Despite that first impression, Hernan connected strongly with Bae. What started as a mentor-mentee relationship “turned out to be a great friendship. Because of him, even though I ended up working at VERA, I joined a national coalition for juvenile justice reform [and] got appointed by the government to a state advisory group. His main [message to] me was, ‘Hernan, whatever you do, do not allow people to tokenize you or make you a poster child or use your experience for something that is not close to your values or that you don’t believe. Never allow anyone to do that. You control your story. You control your experience. And never allow someone else to dictate what your experience is based on their agenda.’

“That feedback is the one that I have taken to heart.”

Hernan is a program analyst for Vera’s Center on Youth Justice, where he works on improving conditions for people behind bars. He is also the northeast regional representative for the Coalition for Juvenile Justice’s National Youth Committee. ♦