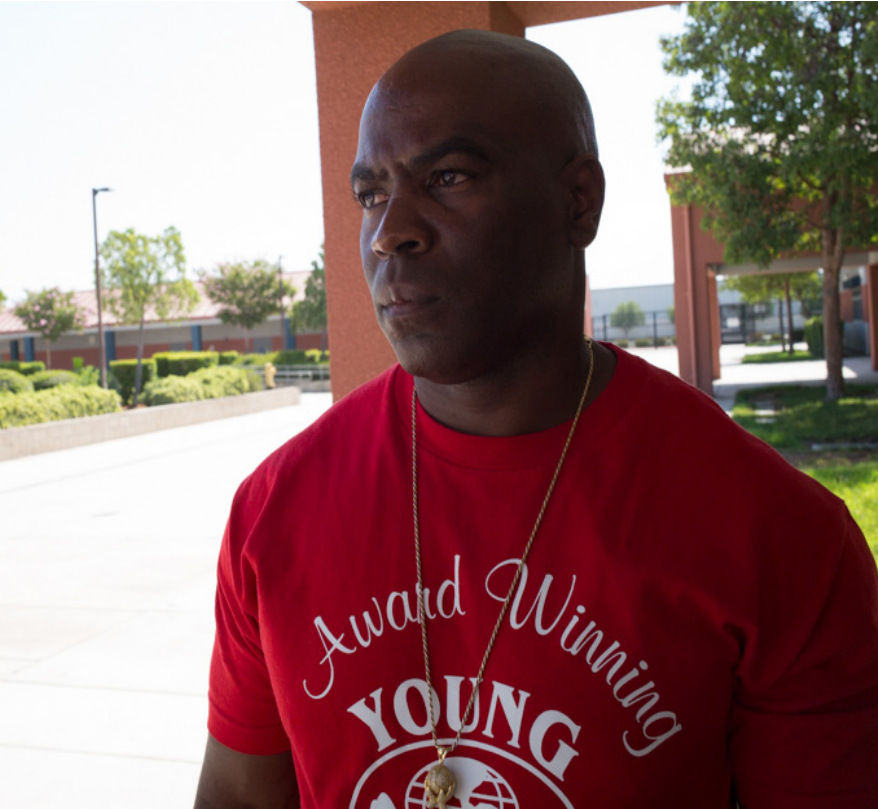


# Terrance



*Don't be afraid of our young kids of color. Those are somebody's sons and daughters. At one time or another, this kid used to just sit at the table and look at someone with their big, little eyes like, 'I want some cereal.'*

I'm old, a little bit. I'll be 47 this year. I remember growing up I couldn't even fathom just being out of my twenties, because all the people that I looked up to died young. My dad overdosed on heroin when I was two years old. He was in his early twenties, so I've already outlived him twice. I tell people that I'm living on borrowed time. I should be dead or in prison.

I grew up in a violent household in a drug-infested area of Pomona, and I was a second-generation gang member. I just became my environment. And, why not? In our impoverished neighborhood, those guys in the gangs were kings! Nice cars, even okay-looking cars, you know? Nice clothes, leather jackets, big-brim hats.

I think it's a misconception that kids want to be in gangs because they want to be deviant or violent. That's not true for everyone. The gang was my model of success growing up. They took care of me and made me feel safe when I was outside. They accepted me with a big smile. It's that camaraderie, that strong bond, that acceptance, that will grow a person into a dedicated gang member.

People think it's hard to get out of a gang because there are people who are keeping you there. No, it's

hard to get out because you have to figure out how to create another lifestyle. It's like suddenly moving into someone else's home. You don't even know how to act, and everyone's telling you what to do, and how to eat, and how to talk. And, pull up your pants! And you're like, "Everybody wears their pants like this where I'm from."

And then there's implicit bias. I never get the benefit of the doubt in any situation. It doesn't matter who you are or what you're doing in the community, or even if you're a celebrity – Black men are always guilty until proven innocent in this country, and even if you're proven innocent the accusations still hang over your head. I've got people following me when I'm shopping, and my mouth gets dry and my heart starts beating faster when a cop pulls me over, even though I know most of the force through my work with gang interventions and trainings. It is rough being a dark-skinned man in America.

Telling a kid who is in a gang or who is fresh out of jail, especially a kid of color, "well, you should go get a job," or "you should go back to school" is not enough. You can't just point him in a direction. You have to actually take the kid to where he needs to be, help

him with the paperwork, do mock interviews, explain the terminology ... And you've got to retrain his focus.

There's this video out there and it's these kids, and you're supposed to count how many times the ones in the white shirts pass the ball. They're scrambling

these long tube socks with his converse high tops and these little bitty shorts. I'd seen my uncle, but I wasn't paying attention because I wasn't trained to focus on that. I was focused on the ballers. My uncle just walked right through my upbringing like a gorilla and

## **“I was a second-generation gang member. It just became my environment.”**

around, and in the midst of this a gorilla walks across the screen. Most people don't even see the gorilla, because we only focus on what we're trained to. I tell these kids, “That gorilla could be your life-changing moment! But you're so caught up in what other people tell you to count and do that you're missing it.”

When I was growing up, I did have this one uncle who was a substitute PE teacher. The rest of my uncles were drug dealers, gang members, drug users, or all of the above. And this was like the late seventies. And this guy looked so uncool, you know? Tall African-American guy with this crooked afro. And he wore

beat his chest, and I didn't even notice him. He went on to become the superintendent of the school district.

I want young men to see the gorilla – go beyond their boundaries, get out of their comfort zone, look at the things that other people aren't seeing, and realize the strength it takes to be your own person. And I want people to see these kids and not be afraid or rush to judgment just because they're wearing baggy pants. We should be more invested in the generations that come after us, and figure out how to bring out the best in these kids. This is my mission, but I don't think it's my job alone.



Shoes decorated by an affiliate of Nick Cannon (longtime host of America's Got Talent), for Terrance to remember that “No matter where I step, or what I step in, I'm still a visionary. So, keep stepping.”

