

**“I am a man.”**

***More than 50 years later, black men in America are still not viewed as fully human.***

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In April 1968, in what would turn out to be the final days of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to support striking sanitation workers. For weeks, proud and determined black men had marched the streets of Memphis wearing placards that read: I AM A MAN. It was a pointed message in a part of the country where many whites persisted in calling them “boy.” Their affirmation of manhood in the face of those who denied it became a defining moment in the struggle for civil rights in mid-20th century America.

As a black man, I am painfully aware of what has changed since then, and what remains the same. Even now, people of color, black men in particular, face the heavy burden of being defined by others instead of controlling the narrative about their own lives. The labeling of black Americans as “criminals,” “felons,” “gangsters,” and similarly as “ex-offenders” and “former gang members,” functions in 2020 much as “boy” did more than half a century ago: to shame and diminish them and erase all that they have confronted and overcome in their lives—harsh conditions and constraints often intentionally imposed upon them.

When those who control the narrative engage in this most fundamental act of oppression—reducing a complex, evolving individual to a stagnant stereotype—they further undermine communities already sensationalized and denigrated in much of the mainstream media, and neglected or assailed by many others in power. These are people, families, and neighborhoods where both actual violence—crimes in which black Americans are disproportionately victims—and the fear-based backlash to common sense criminal justice reforms are directly felt.

Yet in these same communities, black men who have transformed and liberated themselves are once again at the first formation on the frontlines of social change. At a time when New York City’s hospitals were over-run with COVID-19 patients fighting for their lives, these respected community leaders were preventing violent disputes that would otherwise put bullets in the bodies of younger men of color and send them to emergency rooms, victims of a slower rolling public health crisis. Their work then, now, and at all times is a crucial strategy in a country where every day, on average, intentional and accidental gun violence kills more than 100 Americans and wounds more than 200 others.[\[1\]](#)

A.T. Mitchell and Ronald Robertson are two of those community leaders. Having been imprisoned for violent crimes, cumulatively upwards of 50 years between the two men, they are at the forefront of the revitalization of the Brownsville and East New York Community through their respective city-sponsored community-based organizations, Man Up Inc. and Brownsville Think Tank Matters.

History teaches us that such personal transformation is the pathway to social change. Malcolm Little was orphaned after white supremacists murdered his father and stole his mother’s sanity, and as a young man was imprisoned for seven years before shedding his slave name to become the internationally influential leader Malcolm X.

As a girl, Marguerite Annie Johnson was weighed down by racism, raped, and spent several years in self-enforced silence before growing into the artist and bestselling writer Maya Angelou. Their capacity to overcome adversity and transform themselves is not exceptional. Routinely failed by the government, people of color often are forced to navigate lowly and sordid spaces to heal

themselves before helping others to heal. And yet their power in this regard remains one of the least recognized and valued assets in America today—under-valued and suppressed because the race-based dehumanization those striking sanitation workers struggled to overcome in 1968 persists today, both openly and in every crevice and corner of America.

A.T Mitchell and Robert Robertson are amongst hundreds of men and women of color in New York City who have a credible presence and message that resonates with younger people at risk of harm or hurting others, and who become catalysts for them to begin changing their own lives for the better. Teens and young adults who might otherwise be killed, harmed, or incarcerated instead have a vision of who they can become, and through community-based organizations, a pathway to get there—exactly what they deserve and what’s required to build a city that’s safe and prosperous everywhere.

Since 2014, under the leadership of New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio, the city has invested more than \$50 million in FY22, developing a network of community-based organizations that rely on men and women of color whose life experiences, accumulated wisdom, and learned skills in conflict mediation makes public safety efforts far more effective than law enforcement alone. Over the last five years, this Crisis Management System, part of the NYC Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, Office of Neighborhood Safety, has contributed to a 38% percent decline in shootings across 22 communities with the highest rates of gun violence.

This localized, community-based response reflects an approach to public safety in New York City rooted in a lesson that came at great cost to many black and brown New Yorkers: that changing behavior in ways that lead to safer neighborhoods happens far more often through voluntary action, protecting themselves and others, than through the strong arm of the law.

For years, people have been saying, “We cannot arrest our way to safer communities,” and that includes many wearing blue and a badge. The Crisis Management System is an alternative that works in concert with restrained and more effective use of law enforcement. But we won’t reap the intergenerational gains of this public health and injury prevention-based approach to public safety promises to deliver unless we recognize, respect, and listen to the people at the heart of these violence prevention efforts. They are not “ex-offenders” and “former gang members,” they are men and women entitled to define themselves, with much to teach us.

Sources for the historical references above:

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<https://www.malcolmx.com/biography/>

<https://www.biography.com/writer/maya-angelou>

[1] <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-america/>