

Marvin Pierre

Class XLI, Program Director, SER Jobs for Progress (8 Million Stories)

First impressions

My first impression of my classmates at our opening reception was awe. I was in shock that I was asked to be a part of an American Leadership Forum class, amongst such an amazing group of prominent leaders in our city. I kept asking myself, “How did I end up on this list?” From the very beginning I felt deeply grateful and humbled to be part of the ALF experience.

As I got to know my classmates, I realized that even though they were respected leaders they were also “regular” people underneath, and they soon became close friends of mine. I had a chance to share deep conversations with them about the work that I am doing and in exchange, to learn more about theirs.

7 Minute Story

I was really excited to share my 7-Minute Story at our opening retreat. I was eager to explain to my classmates why I am passionate about the work that I do and how my journey has led me to where I am today. I grew up in an impoverished community as product of two Haitian immigrant parents, both of whom were blue collar workers. I shared with my classmates, however, that I did not want my comments to come across as a celebration of overcoming obstacles but rather an explanation of defining my life purpose of being a servant to others. In preparing my 7-Minute Story, I reflected on what it was like to work on Wall Street as a black man and how it shaped my approach to the work that I do now. In sharing my story some of my classmates understood and related to me while others were shocked by the reality that I faced. In some circumstances, I had more superior skillsets than my counterparts on Wall Street but the nature of politics seemed to dictate that I was passed up on opportunities due to the color of my skin. I reflect on those experiences all the time. They made me who I am today. They are a pivotal part of the journey I’ve travelled and the success that I have obtained since then. I actually credit some of those difficult experiences to teaching me how to overcome and beat the odds. I think that I operate from that lens now. These experiences have uniquely positioned me to lead students in the work that I do, to help them navigate the world that we live in, which is, unfortunately, not always a level playing field.

The Value of the ALF Network

Being a part of the ALF network is a constant reminder that I have an obligation to make our city a better place for all who live here. In my work right now, I’m serving as Program Director of Eight Million Stories, a program working to disrupt the school to prison pipeline in Houston. This is a pressing issue in our city. On an annual basis close to 12,000 youth are referred to our juvenile justice system. Our program serves as an alternative pathway to giving disconnected youth second chance opportunities through education, vocational training and social-emotional learning. The name of the program came from a rap song written by A Tribe Called Quest. At the end of the song there is a repetitive phrase, “help me, help me, help me”. When we think about young people in the juvenile system, their behaviors are a cry for help. This song talks about our work and our issue.

I hosted one of our ALF classes here at Eight Million Stories. It was so great for our kids to see my classmates coming to learn about the work that I do. They were really excited that we hosted my ALF classmates as visitors and felt validated that others “care about kids like us”. They told me that seeing my ALF classmates made them feel that more than just the staff that is rooting for them-- the city is advocating for them to be successful. I was so happy to be able to share that with my kids. It felt great to be a part of that!

What has been ALF's impact on you? On the people that you interact with? On the community?

Since I just completed my class three months ago, my reflections on the ALF experience are still developing. So far, I can definitely say that ALF has helped me to become a better leader. My ALF experience reinforced the need for rest and renewal and encouraged questioning and reflection on how to create the balance that I need to give my best. ALF also taught me that it's ok to be vulnerable.

Additionally, ALF has opened a network of people to me that I can call or e-mail be able to support the work I do, which is invaluable. For example, just this morning, I had a meeting with another Senior Fellow and we were talking about how we can work together to leverage a local hospital to bring a bigger focus on young boys of color and support systems to help guide them on a track to success.

What was made possible for you through the ALF scholarship?

The ALF scholarship gave me an opportunity to develop myself as a leader. I believe that the future of our city starts with leaders. ALF helps us create a needed balance for ourselves. We, as leaders, are so committed to the work that we are doing that we sometimes burn the candle at both ends to make our work and our organizations thrive. What we may not see is that sometimes by doing this we are creating a situation where we cause ourselves to burn out, which in turn can leave our organizations in limbo. I've been on a "go, go, go track" for a long time. Growing up in extreme poverty created a super focus on what I do. Had it not been for ALF, I might never have come up for air. It has been extremely important for my sanity, for my family and for the organization that I am serving. ALF helped me to see that proper self-care allows me to maximize my impact as a leader, and also to live life fully and enjoy the fruits of my success!

I remember the day I got the ALF nomination from one of my mentors, Charles Savage. I was deeply humbled to be considered for the program but immediately wondered how would be able to afford the tuition. I had some significant financial burdens at the time and I didn't know if I could pursue the experience as it was a pretty big expense for me. I knew that it would be beneficial for me and for Eight Million Stories if I was able to participate in the program. I knew that ALF would be a great network to be a part of, with some of the most prominent people in the city. I knew that the program will help develop my leadership and it did. I am extremely grateful for the scholarship that I received, that enabled me to develop myself as an individual and leader and has also benefited the children and the organization that I serve.

Class XLI Dialogue on Race

For our concluding ALF Class XLI dialogue, we had a rare opportunity to reflect personally on our experiences with race. After developing deep relationships and building trust with one another over the course of our fellowship year, we felt that there was no better group in which to explore this tough conversation. We felt that it was important to create a way to be transparent about how the color of our skin has made a difference in our lives, professionally and personally. As difficult as it was, we put ourselves out there, and allowed ourselves to expose our vulnerabilities and shared our personal experiences with race. This conversation brought us closer as a group. I really appreciated about our class' willingness to be transparent when needed, and to have a candid conversation about something so personal that is often overlooked in other settings.

What's on the Horizon?

I'm very excited to share that in August will become a diversion program for young offenders in the juvenile system. This will allow our program to serve as an alternative to incarceration here in Harris County. To learn more about our work, please visit <http://www.eightmillionstories.org/> or feel free to e-mail me directly at marvin.pierre@gmail.com.