

From Rejected Boy to Elected Official

Paul Trantham



Paul Trantham's journey has been a roller coaster ride. Despite an early life that challenged him on every level – from abandonment to school drop out to drug and alcohol abuse – today Paul possesses an NEDP and has been elected as ANC Commissioner for Ward 8B02. This is his remarkable story.

Early Life

Born in Washington, DC in 1967, Paul – like all of his four siblings – was put into foster care from birth. The only sibling he knew well at a young age, and to whom he still close, is his “baby sister” Tonya. Paul's first four foster experiences were painful and ended badly. He was thrown out of the last one after stealing rent money from his foster family and using it to take his entire class out to lunch at McDonalds. His foster mother, who had beaten and punished him often, said: “you will be dead before you are 16.” He was just eight years old at the time.

Life at school was also tough. Paul's third grade teacher told him that he would never learn to read. And in fifth grade he was held back, though he learned of this only when school started the next year. His classmates called him “dumb” and “retarded” because he often got into trouble in class.

Paul's life improved when he was moved to his fifth and final foster home in Fort Washington, MD. His foster mother Martha, who Paul called “Grandma”, adored children – “she just had a heart full of love for kids”. Although the house was full of Grandma's own children, two adopted children, and other foster children, Grandma showed Paul special attention. Yet while life at home was finally much better, life at school continued to be a challenge. Paul didn't understand what was going on in class and didn't do any of the work in math. In his first year at Friendly Senior High School he did not do well and was finally expelled. Grandma fought the expulsion and managed to have him sent to Oxon Hill

High School. But Paul thought that he was “just the man” and continued to have a “no care attitude”. At age 15 he stopped going to school and that is when he says: “my whole life changed for the worse.”

“The Other Life”

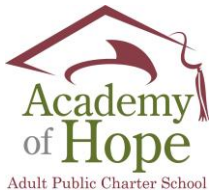
Paul started hanging around with “the wrong people”, drinking and doing drugs, and getting in trouble with the law. Still, he thought: “I’m gonna make it in this world without an education”. Though he had a variety of jobs, such as working at KFC, they just provided the money he needed to buy drugs. With Grandma’s encouragement he went off to Job Corps, but got into trouble for not going to class. He remembers taking the pre-GED exam after just a few months and being told he passed it, but was then kicked out of the program the very next day due to behavior problems. Grandma told him that he could come home to live with her only if he got off drugs and got a job. But he refused to stop doing drugs and eventually Paul ended up homeless. After having a seizure on the street he spent time at Christ House Homeless Men’s Shelter, but was kicked out for missing curfew. His caseworker continued to meet with him and give him money while he was on the street, and finally got him into a drug rehab program. But he left after just four days.

Paul later got into more trouble with the law and, as a condition of his probation, had to attend AA and NA. Through these programs he finally managed to get off alcohol and drugs. It was around this time that his probation officer introduced him to the story of Antwone Fisher. Paul saw many similarities in their two lives (although Fisher had not had any run-ins with the law), and this helped him to let go of his sense of self-pity for his early abandonment and painful childhood, and to focus instead on his strengths and his love for other people. At that point Paul moved into Shalom House, a Single Room Occupancy program, where he stayed for five years. Around this time he joined Allen Chapel AME Church and, with the guidance of his pastor and church family, “never got off track” again.

From NEDP to ANC!

Paul had his first encounter with Academy of Hope in 2005, but left due to his full-time job as a manager at Safeway. Then from 2007-2012 he worked as circulation manager for the “Washington Informer” newspaper, responsible for circulating 19,000 papers and managing seven drivers. But without a high school credential, he realized that his pay did not reflect his level of responsibility and his job title. Finally unable to pay his rent and other bills, Paul says he hit bottom and decided he needed a high school education to move forward. In June 2012 he returned to AoH where Miss Banks, whom he had met in 2005, told him: “I believed in you then, I believe in you now”. This allowed him to open up about his learning challenges and self-doubt. At AoH he says: “they just kept working with me, always going “the extra mile”. While studying, Paul did odd jobs around the church, worked as the pastor’s personal steward, and started a small landscaping business with a lawnmower and leaf blower. When he graduated from AoH in June 2013, Paul said, “Praise the Lord, I am on my way!”.

Today Paul Trantham is a licensed private detective and, with continued support from AoH, plans to attend UDC to become a pastor. And, with his network of city government contacts from his days at



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“The Informer” and his interest in politics and helping people, Paul became a candidate for ANC Commissioner. He ran “an honest campaign” and defeated the incumbent in November 2014. Paul says he is inspired by “people on the ground”, such as all of his mentors at Academy of Hope, “who understand your struggles, understand that you are human, and don’t give up on you. They know that just because you struggle does not mean you are unsuccessful. We all have struggles, but we can persevere. I overcame illiteracy and doubt that I would ever be anything.” Grateful for the support of AoH, all of his family, church members, and the community, Paul Trantham is working hard and making a difference. Much like Antwone Fisher, he is an inspiration to us all.

We would like to thank Jan Leno for volunteering her time and skills toward putting these stories together.

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