

How a Mentor to At-Risk Young Men Spends His Sundays

Toddrick Brockington, who works at the Henry Street Settlement, tends to his mental health and his sneaker collection.



By Tammy LaGorce

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Before Toddrick Brockington got his job at the Henry Street Settlement, a nonprofit that supports Lower East Side residents, he served 26 years in prison for homicide. The irreversibility of that act troubles him still. It also keeps him mindful. “I appreciate life more, and when I say that, I don’t mean specifically my life,” he said, “I mean other people’s lives.”

He brings that appreciation to work every day at Henry Street, where he started the Mentoring and Nurturing (“M.A.N.”) program to steer teenage boys away from trouble and help them envision a future with fewer struggles. Mr. Brockington, 52, lives alone in the West Farms neighborhood of the Bronx.

QUIET START I wake up between 4 and 4:30 a.m. Sometimes I lay there; sometimes I stand in the window and look out and try to orient myself for the day. One of my views is, I think, facing La Guardia Airport. I can see the lights there, the trains passing. It’s really beautiful when it’s dark out. That’s a peaceful time for me, because it’s like I’m the only one up and I have the world to myself. I burn some candles. I’m a strong believer in setting the tone for my day.

CONTINUING EDUCATION When it’s light out, I read. I’m in the process of reading “Outliers” by Malcolm Gladwell for the third time. It’s almost like I’m studying it now. When I went to prison, I didn’t have a G.E.D., so I obtained my G.E.D. and then a bachelor’s degree in behavioral science. Reading helped me express myself better. One of the things I realized as I educated myself was that I hadn’t felt comfortable around educated people, and that nurtured the belief in me that “OK, you’re better off over here, away from educated people.” There’s a book I like to give the young brothers at Henry Street called “As a Man Thinketh” by James Allen. We discuss how our thoughts determine our behavior, as well as the idea that we must be mindful of the seeds, or thoughts, we plant in our minds and those we allow others to plant.

APPOINTMENT TV I don’t really start tasking on Sunday until after nine o’clock, when my favorite show comes on. It’s “CBS Sunday Morning.” Jane Pauley is hosting it now. It reminds me of Reader’s Digest on TV. The segments could be about anything: about the most beautiful places in the world, about people that change the world.



Mr. Brockington switched to a vegan diet while he was incarcerated. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

PINE-SOL AND A PLAYLIST On Sundays, I do meal prep. If I’m cooking rice or something that takes a long time, I’ll do that, and then I’ll start light cleaning, like dusting. I play my R&B oldies: Curtis Mayfield; Willie Hutch; Earth, Wind & Fire. It’s nostalgia. The music and the Pine-Sol take me back to being a kid and having my parents cleaning. I grew up in Brownsville and left Brooklyn in 1981. It was in 1982 or ’83 that I started swinging toward the bad side, when I moved upstate, to Rochester.

MORNING SQUEEZE Breakfast has never been a big thing of mine, so now what I do is I have a juicer. I'm obsessed with it. I get my fruit, throw my vegan protein in there — I'm vegan, so I have to be mindful of certain things I'm not getting in my diet — and, of course, I take my vitamins, and that usually holds me down. Sometimes cooking, cleaning and laundering could be my whole day. Cleaning has always been therapeutic. And when you throw in the candles and the music, it's almost like I'm at a spa.



Enjoying the scenery on a southbound drive. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

ENERGY ABSORPTION If I do venture out on a Sunday, one of my favorite pastimes is driving down the West Side Highway. You see the Jersey side, and in my mind it's like the South of France or something. Sometimes I park. They have a spot, the 96th Street exit, where you can pull off and sit by the water. You can sit there and just zone out. I don't even take my headphones. I just absorb the energy. It helps me stay focused and grounded.

TRUCK CHASE I'm a big foodie. One of my favorite vegan food trucks is Black Rican Vegan, so I chase them around the city a lot if I'm out. Or I'll just find something new on Google Places. I turned vegan for my 36th birthday. That was a big gift to me because I had recently read that veganism extends your life. I was still incarcerated at the time, so I thought I could use an extra few years.



Mr. Brockington at a Harlem fruit market. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

REFURBISHING I love sneakers. I'm like a kid with them. I probably have like 80 pairs, and I like to clean them. I call it refurbishing. When the young brothers at Henry Street see me wearing these sneakers, I'm quick to tell them that these are a last-thing purchase, because I have to pay for so many other things, like rent and car.

NICE IS DOPE Henry Street works with New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program. Recently I was out there trying to get kids to sign up, and a lot of them were like, "No, I don't want to work." But they're wearing \$300 sneakers and \$400 sweatsuits. In a lot of instances, that's due to a parent that didn't have much. The parent's mentality is, "I'm going to give you what I didn't have," but it should

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be, “I’m going to teach you what I didn’t know.” I always share this story with the young brothers about values: When I was a kid, I saw kids with nicer things than I had, and I automatically equated that with them being a nice person. So I set out to acquire nice things so people would like me, as opposed to setting out to be a better person. It’s cool to have nice things, but it’s even dooper to be a nice person.

WRITE BRAINED I take my clothes out for work and get my food ready, have it bagged up for the next day. Then I sit in my room in my comfortable chair. Sometimes I’ll write curriculums. I try to get to bed by midnight. I think when I lay down, that’s when my brain works the most. You ever heard some people say they write in their sleep? I think that’s me. I can’t really relax. I guess that’s anxiety.

Sunday Routine readers can follow Toddrick Brockington on Instagram at @toddrickb7.