

Finding A New Future

Amicus Specialized Case Manager Jerome Graham

It's been called "staring into the abyss." What happens when all the ambitions, all the predictions, all the hopeful expectations of an entire lifetime dissolve in one moment? When all that goes away, what takes its place?

Many of those visiting Amicus have experienced such a moment of emptiness when they realize that the consequences of their crime go far beyond doing time in prison. Amicus Specialized Case Manager Jerome Graham found it while being helped off a basketball court.

Growing up in north Minneapolis, Jerome was the second youngest of four kids. Jerome's mother and father separated when he was five, and since that time he and his siblings were raised solely by his mother.

He drew on two strengths as he grew up. First was a love of basketball, which he had been playing since he was five.

The second strength was less apparent but possibly even more important to his future. Jerome was a natural mediator.

"It just felt good being able to help people resolve their issues in a peaceful manner," he recalled.

Jerome was average height going into his freshman year but he grew two inches every year of high school after that. His growth spurt, combined with his talent and work ethic, landed him a Division 1 basketball scholarship to Boston University.

On the court he established himself as a "grinder," someone who would succeed because he played smarter and worked harder than the other player.

Going into his senior year he was looking forward to a breakout season.

"I was in the best shape of my life and I knew I had a chance to go pro – either in the NBA or overseas."

That all ended in the second game of the season, as he suffered a serious back injury. He had surgery and missed school for a month, suffering constant pain that



Amicus Specialized Case Manager Jerome Graham today and during his college basketball playing days at Boston University.

made even sitting through class a challenge. But it was more than that.

"I was so excited to go pro. I wanted it. My family wanted it too. You can go crazy from having your dreams shattered."

Jerome admits he was tempted to just quit and never come back, but he credits his grandmother in providing the spiritual guidance that helped him make it through that time. He refocused on a goal to walk with his class at graduation, which he did.

Ironically, the anguish he went through may have solidified his future career aspirations. He had found an interest in psychology early in his college career and it reminded him of how much he liked helping people as a peer mediator.

Jerome graduated with a degree in psychology and, moving back to the Twin Cities, he worked in the mental health field for organizations such as Bristol Place and Thad Wilderson and Associates.

Jerome went through the second crisis in his life in 2004, tempted by a promise of fast money he could use to pay bills and support his child. He began hanging with the wrong crowd and eventually was charged with drug possession.

He was sentenced to a diversion program for first time offenders and given three years' probation. While the sentence was lighter than it might have been, Jerome would have been incarcerated and barred from many jobs in the mental health field if he violated probation.

He made it through and was eventually granted an expungement. Still, when he sees guys in the Amicus office who are one step away from incarceration, he sees himself too.

As a Specialized Case Manager, Jerome is responsible for working with clients at Amicus who are reentering their community after a prison sentence and would benefit from more individualized work. Many of these clients are discouraged and tempted to discontinue their efforts to make changes in their lives.

"I went through some of the same stuff they're going through – being poor, having a jail record. I could have easily gone back to the streets and violated my probation – just thrown everything away. Now, (with the expungement) I can also show them someone who went through the steps needed to restore my future."

One of the privileges of Jerome's work at Amicus is seeing the progress an individual can make, reclaiming their lives after staring into the abyss.

"A lot of these guys came through struggles which were way worse than mine. Seeing them making it and knowing I helped feels good."

"I try to let them know that no matter how difficult the circumstances you're in, you still have options. As long as you have life you have the opportunity to change your life for the better."