

Producing Defying the Odds
By GPB Executive Producer Pamela Roberts
2008 Update

Ten years ago I began to produce the television documentary project for Georgia Public Broadcasting which would become known as **Defying the Odds**. My charge was to follow students who had been chosen as first graders to receive a full college scholarship by the Merrill Lynch Foundation. Randomly selected as part of the high school graduating class of 2000, the 25 students attended Capitol View Elementary School, located in one of the poorest parts of Atlanta's inner city. Since more than 50% of this population typically drops out before graduating from high school, Merrill Lynch hoped to inspire these students to defy the odds and fulfill their highest education potential.

My first contact with the students came when they were in the 10th grade, and although they attended high schools across metro Atlanta, they met every other Saturday at the Urban League with retired educator Barbara Whitaker. Dr. Whitaker is a fiery grandmother-like figure who provided tutors, field trips and intense motivational talks for all who would listen. As I sat at one of the student desks that first day at the Urban League, I froze in horror when I realized I couldn't understand much of what the students were saying. I was a white woman surrounded by the lingo of the inner city, a lingo sometimes described as Ebonics. How was I going to produce a documentary based on the lives of these students when we couldn't understand each other? At that moment I knew this project would be the challenge of my career.

Over the next four years the students and I came to know each other very well. I followed them all the way through their high school years and into their first year of college or job hunting or jail, depending on their individual destinies. The initial language barrier melted away but it was nothing compared with the cultural barrier. It was jarring to go between their world of the inner city and mine of the suburban middle class. But as I and my camera crew got to know them and to see what they were going through, a bond formed between us that exists to this day. Living in the inner city is like living in a war zone, and my great cameraman Wayne Baumgardner and I lived through that war with them. From prom night to school challenges to the deaths of their friends through violence - we were with them for the whole ride.

As producer, I began in 1998 by following all of the students, a dauntless task with so many to cover. Over time I narrowed the group down and ultimately settled on five students whose stories were representative of the overall experiences of these children:

John Finney's parents were both addicted to crack cocaine and he was severely neglected during his childhood. Often homeless, John was forced to sell drugs beginning in the fifth grade. He dropped out of high school in the tenth grade yet later achieved his G.E.D. John attended Talladega College but dropped out after his brother Edric was killed in a drug-related murder. His father recently died and John lives today with his mother. He holds down odd jobs and writes rap music.

Tiffany Holloway never knew her father and was raised by her supportive single parent mother. Through the federal busing program, Tiffany commuted long hours each day to a better high school away from the inner city. She attended prestigious Hampton University but dropped out her senior year for what she calls “social reasons.” Today Tiffany works as an administrative assistant and is writing a novel.

Tony Meeks is one of only three white students from Atlanta in the original Merrill Lynch program. With an absent father who spent time in prison, Tony was raised by his mother and stepfather. Tony joined a gang in the seventh grade and dropped out of school by the ninth grade. After leaving the gang, he went on to achieve his G. E. D. and briefly attended a local trade school. Today he works in construction and designs websites on the side.

Calvin Colquitt is the only one of the five students who came from an intact two-parent family. He was an honor student in high school and very popular as well. In love with football, Calvin dropped out of Grambling University his senior year when his football career fell apart. But today he has started a successful counseling business for inner city youth which he named Defying the Odds.

Marketa Goodwin was part of the Merrill Lynch program in Houston, Texas but moved to Atlanta in the tenth grade. She was adopted by her aunt and uncle because her parents were both crack cocaine addicts who could no longer take care of her. Marketa’s life turned around in Atlanta and she formed a desire to become a doctor. In 2005 she graduated from Tuskegee University in spite of having a child during her last two years in college. Today she is the mother of two and works as a supervisor in a medical laboratory in Kansas City.

Of the five students we followed in Atlanta, only one - or 20%- graduated from college. This is the same percentage of students from the Merrill Lynch program nationwide who graduated from college. There were ten cities with 25 students in each city, for a total of 250 children who were chosen to be part of the Merrill Lynch ScholarshipBuilder program in 1988. Merrill Lynch ended the program in 2007 and to my knowledge is not doing further follow-up on the students as a whole.

In hindsight it seems to me that this was a grand experiment with one large flaw: the program did not realize or take into account the influence of the parents’ difficult lives upon their children. How can children even contemplate college when their parents struggle daily with drug abuse, lack of education and dehumanizing poverty? Through the course of making this documentary we came to realize that as the family goes, so goes the student. And if we want to help those children, we’ve got to help their parents. This is the deepest lesson of Defying the Odds, which first aired in 2002. And sadly, the documentary is just as true today as it was six years ago.

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