



# Where's My Village?



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Illustration: Louisa Bertman

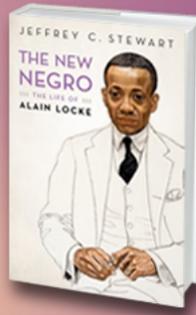
**Editor's note:** This is the second of two essays **The Root** is publishing in partnership with *Caught*, a new podcast from WNYC Studios about the juvenile-justice system. We hope to generate a conversation about how we can support rather than merely punish young people who are in crisis, and we want to hear from you too. [Go here to record your own story.](#) [Read the first story here.](#)

You can tell two very different stories about my youth. I joke that I'm a two-time Ivy League offender—both undergrad and graduate. As a kid, I played Simon Says, went to church every Sunday and attended cooking classes at our local recreation center. My cousins and I handpicked flowers from neighborhood gardens, arranged them into bouquets and sold them to our white neighbors, Pat and Kathy, who lived in a house next to our public housing complex. With the cash, a junk food fest ensued.

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As a teenager, however, I was also detained in a store for shoplifting, carried a knife and tagged my name on buildings, all of which my grandmother reported via phone to my father—who was serving a life sentence in prison. I offered an excuse for the knife: The girls who housed razors under their tongues wanted to slice my face, for no legitimate reason.

I perceived my offenses as small compared with others, but the truth is, I was lucky. I just didn't get *caught*. I never had to pay for my adolescence in the way many young people do today—the roughly 1 million youths a year who churn through our criminal-justice system in some form. The only police officer I knew was Officer Phillips, a cute D.A.R.E. officer I crushed on. I was sassy and teetered on the edge of mischief, but never considered myself an “at risk” youth.

Which raises the question for me: What is an “at risk” youth? What have we done as a society to make such youths so vulnerable, and what can we start to do differently?

*The Root* is partnering with WNYC Studios to convene a conversation about these questions. Over nine episodes of a new podcast, *Caught*, WNYC profiles young people who didn't share my luck.

Each of them is stuck in the criminal-justice system. Some committed serious crimes, others were swept up in the politics of “zero tolerance.” But all of them needed help and instead got punishment.

As they say, it takes a village. So where's the village for these young people?

Personal interventions are imperative to young people, whether they're in trouble, on the edge or simply need space. I talked to Ali Knight, chief operating officer at Fresh Lifelines for Youth, a nonprofit working to break the cycle of violence, crime and incarceration of teens.

Ali is a part of my personal village. If you ask him, he'll tell you he's the quintessential latchkey kid, raised in the crack-era, 1980s New York City. He was one of eight children and his parents both struggled with drug addiction, which thrust him into the foster care system, where he slept at the hand of abuse for years. Ali talked to me about the importance of personal interventions.

**WNYC:** Growing up in variations of abusive foster care is why you say, “I grew up angry, with a ‘fuck the world’ attitude.” At the height of your anger, someone stepped in. Tell me about that.

**AK:** At 16, I got into a fight with a kid and forgot [it happened]. A week later, he ran up on me with his buddy and he sliced me in my face. I ran to get out of immediate danger. Then I kept walking. About 10 blocks away from where it happened, my mind came to consciousness. “Where am I? Why am I sweating while I’m walking?” It was freezing cold, February, New York. I touched my face and realized that it wasn’t sweat but blood. Then it all came back to me. The experience was so traumatic, I literally forgot that it happened.

I literally said, “I’m going to kill this guy,” and I planned it. I saved up \$125 and bought a gun. I planned to be at a movie one day, have my friend buy the tickets so I could have an alibi. I didn’t go through with it because I didn’t have enough anger. I wasn’t angry enough to go kill him or anyone. I still got into a lot of trouble, but it was probably the thing that got me on the path to saying, “All right, there’s a precipice and I’m really close to the edge.”

So I’m in a group home in Brooklyn, got my face sliced, struggling in high school, but determined not to drop out or get kicked out. My great-aunt Muriel said I could come live with her in the Jersey City suburbs. It was the best thing that could have happened to me; it pulled me out of the hood. I was finally in the care of somebody who believed in me, saw the good in me, somebody I didn’t want to disappoint.

Part 1 of a three-part video series in partnership with *The Root* and WNYC Studios. See part 2.

**WNYC:** Can you think of a time when someone stepped in that didn’t have to, who wasn’t family, like your great-aunt? Who was it, what was their background and why did they help?

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**AK:** I was 17, I was in high school, still was an angry kid. I said something slick, slightly flirtatious, disrespectful to a woman in school. She looked like she was my age, but she was probably 23, 24. Turns out she was an assistant principal, at a different school within the same building. She was offended and said, “I want him out of here!”

We had a parent-teacher conference. No parent came because my grandmother was working, and real talk, I didn’t tell my grandmother because I was cutting school. My guidance counselor came. In this conference, they tried to push me into the GED program. But she defended me like I was her son. I was like, “Absolutely not.” She was like, “Absolutely not; he’s a smart, brilliant kid.”

They asked for my transcripts as proof, and she said they weren’t ready. My transcripts were available; I was failing all of my classes but gym. She lied, later saying, “If I would have given them your transcripts, they would have completely made the argument that you should be put in a GED program and get kicked out of school. And that’s not right for you; you’re smart, you’re capable, and you shouldn’t be evaluated just on what’s on paper.”

Setting those expectations, telling me that I'm special, made me believe I was special, and that's important.

**WNYC:** Have you noticed that the youth you've worked with throughout the years respond differently to help depending on where it comes from?

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**AK:** I love the idea of models that are also mirrors. I think that black people, people with lived experiences, can be amazing advocates, mentors and inspirations as long as they can couch their own trauma and not bring it into the relationship. That's a lot of the challenge for us. A lot of us got trauma, so it's hard to fully step into a space when you see another young person struggle; it could be a trigger, since it's a painful reminder of your own past.

That's a hard thing to do; it's tricky. I think it can be, and should be, people who look like us, stepping up and showing up. But if those people who look like us also have the same lived experiences and trauma and aren't able to effectively compartmentalize that in how they show up in the relationship, it can be worse.

The key is making sure all forms of assistance are authentic and based in respect and care.

**WNYC:** Doing justice work is no small feat, yet continuing to show up is crucial. Early in your career, you were working with a re-entry project for men who were transitioning from state facilities back to New York. What was it about your first day that helps sustain your commitment to justice work?

**AK:** My first day on that job, first time in any correctional facility, I ran into two men of color from my neighborhood. I've always felt like I've been close to the edge, to falling over. No matter how much I've done, invested, how far I've *made it*, [it would take only a few things to] wipe it all away.

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I don't have external assets, no safety net or family to fall back on. All I've got is resilience and grit. So I've always felt like I'm a decision or two away from being in prison—from having my life turned around by somebody else. So that first day on the job was a reminder of that. It became real and personal: That could be me.

**WNYC:** Now you're helping hundreds of kids on a macro and micro level. What are effective means of intervention? Is it programs, cultural competence, kindness to strangers?

**AK:** It's programs for some people. For other people, it's a single person with a small gesture or someone making you their favorite. At the end of the day, no man is an island; you've gotta create your village. Some of us are fortunate to have a village that's functional, that meets all of our needs, and some of us have to find our village. But you do need a village.

This is a little depressing, but society is an imperfect concept. Society is incapable of meeting all the needs for all of its members all of the time. There will always be someone or some group marginalized. What you do to keep your society functioning is that you always focus on the margin. And you put the focus on the margin in the center. So, eventually, somebody else will be on the margin, and you'll have to put them in the center, so it doesn't end. That's how you make up for the imperfections of society. You continue to do work to put the marginal folks in the center.

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*We want to hear from you as well. WNYC and **The Root** are asking for your own stories about being young and finding help. Was there a time in your youth when you needed someone to step up and help? Did you find that support? If so, from who? Go to [CaughtPodcast.org](https://www.caughtpodcast.org) to record your story. We'll play some of the stories we get on the podcast.*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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