

#Advance Your Legacy:
POWER MOVES FOR BUILDING INFLUENCE

SAMPLE

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Preface: If You Can't Be the Sun, Be a Star!

The butterflies in my tummy were literally making me sick. Sitting in a chair beside my cousin Airicka and behind me several families who had lost their loved ones to state sanctioned violence or police negligence, I would be speaking at the opening ceremony of the first Convening for Black Lives. I had just drove in seven hours from Albany, NY to be a spectator to the weekend's events. I never imagined myself standing before thousands of Black Lives Matter supporters and organizers. But even after linking up with my cousin, and her introducing me to what would soon be my movement family members, my nerves wouldn't let up. My knees just kept shaking.

Back when Black girls would play double dutch in the streets of Chicago and the boys would come in the house smelling like outside after hooping in the driveway with a milk carton rim, I was carrying around my big brown hand-held cassette tape recorder, a book or my journal and pen. I always knew I wanted to be a journalist or a singer or a flight attendant. At that age, I was certain about everything and knew nothing about myself. I had lots of talents and was a very bright child. My church and family members would always comment on how special they thought I was. I don't believe I was better than anyone else's child, I was just surrounded by love.

One of the times I should have felt lucky and special was when my cousin Mamie Till Mobley gave me a chance to become one of her Emmett Till Players. The Emmett Till Players were young people who Mamie worked with personally on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speeches after the kidnapping and brutal death of her son Emmett Till. Emmett, who was just 14 at the time of his murder, was before then, known for being a charismatic kid like any other, full of joy and lots of potential. Emmett was no doubt spoiled and a boy who always seemed to be the center of attention. Many of the children Mamie chose to work with had speech impediments or perceived behavioral disorders. Certainly, the children Mamie worked with must have reminded her of Emmett who was plagued with polio at a young age that left him with a stutter. When he found it difficult to say something, Mamie taught Emmett to whistle out his words, something she feared later had cost him his life. Much like Emmett, she taught The Emmett Till Players through unconventional methods to overcome their challenges, both quite literally and figuratively. Mamie thought particularly high of me and felt that I was privileged in many ways that ruled me out as a qualified candidate for membership as an Emmett Till Player. I had access to resources and a good education in the South Suburbs with lots of great mentors. I was college bound and that was not up for debate when it came to her and her husband Gene who was consistently contributing to my non-existent college fund. I'll have to ask my mom where that money went, since I'd always hand it to her for safekeeping because I didn't have a bank account at that time. Mamie would try to teach me poems and speeches and started off with a very simple one "Be The Best of Whatever You Are" by Douglas Malloch. She told me to record it on my cassette player and practice the words with the recording daily. Unfortunately I was much more interested in recording my favorite episodes of Kimmy Gibbler and DJ Tanner on Full House. One time, I started off practicing the poem saying, "If you can't be the Sun, Be a star..." but before I could finish I cut to the chorus of a top of the charts single by Bel Biv Devoe, belting,

“That girl is POISONNNN... POISONNNN... POISONNN...” I still own this cassette tape to remind myself that you miss 100% of the success from opportunities you don’t take. As funny as that little story is, I always wonder how I might have been different or who I would have become if I had appreciate the time and lessons Mamie gave me while she was still here to guide me through life’s major challenges and minor hiccups.

An old African Proverb says, “If a child washes his hands he could eat with kings.” Which in translation means, if you prepare and allow others to teach you what you need to know in the present, you’ll be prepared for opportunities that come your way in the future and be successful in due time. And so I believe it to be true, that if we all had sat at the feet of our ancestors just a little while longer, we’d known a great deal more about how to navigate through life. In life it is not ideas that make us great, but rather the correct execution of ideas that does.

So I push through my fear and let the butterflies continue to flutter around in my tummy each time I grab a microphone. In Mamie’s honor I speak whenever I am called upon to do so and remind others not just how ugly hate was, but also how beautiful love is. I know that it was a mother’s love that gave her strength when she needed to take the stand in court and talk about the boy she knew and taught to be a gentleman. A mother’s love that held an open casket funeral for her son, so that the same death didn’t stop at the next neighbor’s door steps. A mother’s love that caused her to keep fighting for justice long after two White men were acquitted and later sold the story of how they murdered her son to Look Magazine for \$4000. It is her loving spirit that lives on inside of me. Her legacy is mine to carry on.

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Chapter 1: Decide How You Want To Be Remembered

I didn't think life would get better. I sat on the floor of my college dorm room leaned up against the open mini-fridge. I had called 10 friends, including all 5 of my sorority sisters and no one picked up. I pulled out another bottle of vodka left over from a pre-game party months ago and mixed it with a bottle of fruit punch I had purchased in the vending machine on the first floor. Before that, I'd chugged down 3 Smirnoffs, all on an empty stomach because I didn't want to go eat in the cafeteria alone that night. Now, all out of alcohol and no other vices to turn to, I picked up my makeup brush and began to paint my face, covering the dark circles and swollen puffy eyelids I had from sobbing uncontrollably for the last hour. I couldn't really pinpoint what the exact cause of my sorrows were. I'm sure, in my mind, I had many. If I remember correctly, I had battled with what I now know as depression due to vitamin deficiency and chemical imbalance as far back as high school. I had a lot of stressors at one time. My high school sweetheart had just informed me that he was about to become a father and that he would be enlisting for the Navy. My heart was crushed and I felt very betrayed. I had recently shared my interest in searching for my biological father with my mother and her response was, "You don't want to go opening up a can of worms..." I wasn't quite sure what that meant or even how to respond to that. So I didn't. And the straw that broke the camel's back, overwhelmed by my studies, duties as a Resident Assistant and a student leader, I had forgotten to write down my scheduled appointment for my academic advising session to schedule my classes for the following semester, subsequently missing my appointment and showing up instead for my sorority sister's. I broke down in tears right there in the advising office, as if I couldn't just reschedule a new appointment.

I looked out the window and watched cars speed down Oakland Avenue. There were always cars speeding down that street. I opened the window and gazed at the headlights flying by and allowed the wind to hit my face. In that moment I contemplated what life would be like for those I'd leave behind if I chose to end mine that night.

I was filled with liquid courage, so I felt nothing.

I was numb.

When the tears stopped crawling down my face and dripping from my chin, I was ready to die. I had made peace with my decision. I wanted to walk into the middle of the street just as a car would speed by. I thought about what would happen if I failed at ending my life. I was okay with that because at least I would feel something. A physical pain that would make sense of all the hurt I was feeling inside. Pain for which I had not determined a source.

That's when my phone buzzed. I had received a text message. It was a friend of mine who had graduated the year before. I didn't even know she was in town. She had car problems and was stranded on the side of the road. In that moment I had to make a decision. Would I respond to a friend who needed me or ignore it and give in to my suicidal thoughts. This time, the phone actually rang and on the other end was my friend. She sounded desperate for help and seemed genuinely frustrated and a little afraid. Her current location was an abandoned parking lot in the middle of nowhere.

I decided I didn't want my story to end there.

I sobered up and went to go look for my friend.

And just as quickly as those suicidal thoughts came to me, they left. My desire to live was based in my value of service to others. That was the first time I had suicidal thoughts, but it

certainly wasn't the last. Mental health continued to be a challenging area for me throughout my life, but my 100% success rate for overcoming negative thoughts has been due to my greater desire to help others overcome and outlast their hardships. Even to this day, though I seldom experience them because I place my emotional wellness above all else, when I feel triggered, I reach out for support and evaluate what it is that I need in that moment.

I wanted to save myself. The me I saw in other people. I wanted to save that girl who drank herself into a lulled state of depression to the point that she was committed to taking her own life. That girl felt lonely even when she wasn't alone, but had many close friends and family who loved her and a sisterhood of sorors who were bonded by their devotion to their values.

Though at that time I had much to live for, I was not practicing gratitude for the love that was present in my life. As taboo as it was, I started seeing a counselor on campus once a week until I was able to bounce back and feel like I had gain control of my life again. It was then that I was able to unpack much of what was bottled up inside of me.

My sorority has a saying, "Membership in Delta Sigma Theta is a lifetime commitment." I reflect on this often.

What is a lifetime commitment?

I can recall my Big Sister Ngozi Onura's gift to me when I crossed the burning sands. It was a red Bible. It was probably the most memorable gift I have ever received. For me, Big Sister Ngozi was the epitome of an ideal Delta. She allowed herself to be vulnerable and authentic while still exuding radiance, resilience and respect for herself and others. From her, I learned that a lifetime commitment is a decision that serves others long past the end of your life.

Because I hadn't compile a vault of work that could be released for the next hundred years and no one knew me as Prince or The Symbol, I was pretty sure I hadn't fully honored that commitment.

It was time to get clear on who I was and how I wanted to be remembered. Clarity comes from action, not thought.

That semester, I created a petition to have a speed bump placed on Oakland Avenue. Though the petition did not receive the necessary signatures to move forward with the placement of the speed bump, I was able to persuade many of my friends and sorority sisters to lower their speed when approaching campus down Oakland Avenue. Their respect for me and the cause is why I was able to influence their behavior. It was then that I had learned the important lesson that power is leveraging influence to change people's thoughts or behavior. Influence is why President Obama thinks Beyonce' is ruling the world. She has an extremely loyal fan club that's known as the Bey Hive. Some as young as four years old that will clap back at other artists who even suggest that Beyonce' has flaws. I knew when a four year old was getting in formation, because Bey said it, I needed to get me some of whatever she's been giving out cause her albums fly off the shelves like hot cakes and no one even buys cds anymore. Bey drops albums overnight, with no promotion, no warning and breaks the internet. Beyonce' is a household name. Beyonce' is the brand.