

OFFICER
LaMar Sharpe

FOUNDATIONS

Building character in our youth and hope in our community.



An Aaron McMahon Production

**“DON'T BE A PRODUCT OF YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES.
BE A PRODUCT OF YOUR DECISIONS.”**



OFFICER LAMAR SHARPE

- ◆ Origin Story
- ◆ The Be A Better Me Foundation



ORIGIN STORY

I grew up in a rough neighborhood in Akron, Ohio.

As a kid, my mom and dad both worked at BF Goodrich and they each made around seventeen dollars an hour, which was really good back in the day. Especially when a gallon of gas cost about 80 cents a gallon. My parents did a great job providing for us kids.

When I was two or three years old. the doctors had to break my legs and put me in braces because they were worried I wouldn't be able to walk or run right. I also had to wear these correction shoes with bars attached to the side of them.

I remember years later when I watched *Forrest Gump* and saw him in leg braces. Like, that was me! My mom kept those braces and shoes for a while and seeing them in the corner triggered my memory more than I actually remembered wearing them.

I felt like I was slower than a lot of the kids growing up. Maybe that's why I have arthritis in my legs today. Or maybe my arthritis is from getting hit everyday for years during my football career.

The lure of the streets

When I was seven or so, my parents got a divorce. Just like that, we were poor. My dad left for another woman, who went on to become his wife. Ultimately, we were the ones left suffering once the dust settled.

My mom got laid off from BF Goodrich and started working two jobs while going to school. My siblings and I were living off canned beans and government cheese. We were living in this gang infested area and I'm seeing everybody out there hustling,

selling drugs, gangbanging - and they're all rocking Adidas and Kangol. All I had were some Wranglers, a few shirts, and some cheap plastic shoes.

"I could have easily been that guy locked up or dead. Absolutely. I could be that guy."

One day when I was about 11, I was outside tossing my football in the yard when a local drug dealer called me over.

"Young blood, come on over here."

I walked over, but I kept my distance because I knew this dude was a dealer.

"What's up," I said.

"You want to make some money?" He asked.

And I'm like, "Yeah."

He said, "I'm gonna give you 80 bucks."

That was some serious money for a little kid. "Okay, so what do I gotta do?"

I asked.

"I want you to deliver this package for me," he replied.

Even though I said yes at first, I knew what he was going to ask me to do. I guess I was quickly processing it over in my head.

"Man, I can't," I said, "My mom is gonna be home and I have to go to church with her."

He shook his head, "Get out of here, you little sucker."

That was one of the most defining moments of my life. I realized that if I would've delivered that package, at some point, I would have possibly ended up getting shot or getting arrested.

Life on the streets was no longer an option for me, which allowed me to put more focus into sports.

Boy n the Hood

Street life didn't appeal to me, neither did the police. That neighborhood was bad - even the police. There were a lot of cops in the area who were known for jacking people up - with or without cause. And it wasn't a race thing really. Sure, white cops would give me the eye, but even the black cops would drive by and mean-mug me while I was throwing a baseball in my front yard. It was like they were just waiting for me to do something wrong. They looked at every young black man in our neighborhood as trouble.

I remember one night, my friends and I were at the wrong place at the wrong time. A fight had broken out with some guys nearby and we knew those guys fought with knives and guns. We left the area as quickly as possible. We took the longest way home possible, trying to avoid any danger or involvement with anything that was going on that night.

As we were navigating our way back home, a cruiser rolled up on the curb in front of us, and scared the hell out of us. One officer had his gun out and the other had his hand on his gun.

"Get on the car. Put your hands on the car!"

So, I'm laying on the car and shaking. In my head I'm like, *Yo, what? I didn't even do anything. This is wild.*

The cops got out and threw me on the car - almost exactly like that scene in *Boyz n the Hood* when the cops threw Ricky on the car. It was scary, but we weren't doing anything wrong, so they let us go.

New heights

When I was a sophomore, my mom lost the house, which was a blessing in disguise. She moved us to a better neighborhood, where there wasn't as much violence.

Even though I preach that we are a product of our decisions and not our environment, it's pretty hard to separate the two at a young age. Especially when nobody is really telling you that.

New neighborhood. New opportunities. I was really starting to stand out on the football field. After getting recruited by almost every school in the country to play football, I chose the University of Kansas to get as far from home as possible. I knew that if I stayed around Akron, there was a chance that I would get sucked into that life I knew as a child.

I played college ball for three years before returning home to help raise my first child. I went to work selling vacuum cleaners as I tried out for the NFL. I did a workout with the Miami Dolphins and tried out for the Cleveland Browns when they returned to Cleveland in 1999 (God knows they needed all the help they could get back then), but it never happened for me.

The Force is strong with this one...

Next, I worked as a Corrections Officer at a detention center. It was bad. Some guys quit on their first day and never came back. Some guys got beat up by the kids. I was definitely put in positions where I had to rough some kids up, but afterward, I'd sit them down and explain...

“Hey, listen, you’re not on the streets, okay? In here, you lost your freedom. Now, it’s my job to tell you what to do and how to act. Okay? Now, let’s talk about you and why you’re here.”

Once you’ve opened that door, you can start connecting with them.

Some of the police officers, who brought the kids in, came to me and said, “I don’t know what you’re doing to these kids, but they respect you and talk highly of you. You need to take the police test.”

I was back and forth on taking that test, talking myself out of it with any excuse I could come up with. On the day of the exam, I even lost my ID. It wasn’t meant to be, I thought. But something in me knew that it was a chance to succeed - and that paycheck looked a lot better than the nickels and dimes I was pulling. Hesitantly, I took the exam and passed with flying colors.

As I write this story, I have been a Police Officer with the City of Canton Police Department for the past eighteen years. It has turned out to be one of the biggest blessings of my life - along with my wife and children. Being on the force has allowed me to connect with the youth and our community.

It also paved the way for my greatest accomplishment to this day, aside from my children, my foundation.



THE BE A BETTER ME FOUNDATION

In 2017, my wife Deidra supported me in fulfilling a lifelong dream, starting the Be A Better Me Foundation to help guide our youth to make better decisions that will impact their world and ours. The response has been overwhelmingly positive and I see the results, first-hand, every single day.

The Be A Better Me foundation is a community-based non-profit foundation designed to help empower and encourage youth—who are on and off the right path in life—to see the good in themselves and others. Too many kids these days do not have positive role models and influences in their everyday lives. The organization's goal is to provide hope and influence in our next generation to prove to them that they can make an impact in their lives, families and community. The foundation also works to strengthen the relationship between police and the community.

What we do

We've been working on our tutoring program for the last two months and it sounds like it's real easy. Like we're going to tutor kids. Listen, I've been ready to pull my hair out. I have never been so frustrated. But the way I view things is like, okay, we're going to have some bumps in the road. We have a book bag program that we give away every summer for free for the last three years. We're still changing stuff. So we're going to change things. But for now, we just put down what we're doing and then we'll tweak along the way.

We have peer mentoring partners. Peer mentoring is basically like peer talk, where the kids can sit down and talk about their issues with someone around the same age or circumstances. It's really interesting. We also partnered with Child & Adolescent Behavioral Health, which provides a certified peer mediator.

What we will do

Today, there's a lot of backlash between the police and the community. Way too much. There's distrust. There have been times I have been afraid for my life. And good officers are going on calls and getting shot. Something needed to be done to mend the relationship between police and residents and I didn't know how to go about it, so I started this organization. But there's so much more we can do.

Being a police officer, I'm viewed as a person of authority. Thinking back, I remember how I was afraid of authority, but we can channel that into so many different paths and flip it. With an official position of authority, police officers have an opportunity to reach more people. If I was just a regular Joe Blow around my community, I don't know if this would all have the same effect. I'm looking for police officers around the country who want to help me take this foundation to greater heights.

I want to create a blueprint to make it easy to expand this thing in hopes to open Be A Better Me Foundations across the country and have police officers run them. I really want to reach Chicago and I know it's a challenge because of what's going on there. But at the same time, our murder rate per capita isn't far from Chicago's. So when I think about that, I know it's possible.

We can make it happen.

Let's go! This is our community and we're taking it back.

It is my mission to spread even more hope and love throughout cities across the country. I don't want my face on these. I want other police officers to take the reigns and be the faces of our organization in their cities. We have an opportunity to change things. Right now.

Join us and support a brighter future for us all. Let's be the change together.



BE THE CHANGE

- ◆ 5 Lessons For Parents
- ◆ A Twisted Tale of Fatherhood
- ◆ 5 Lessons For Our Youth
- ◆ Evidence Files #1
- ◆ A Call To Arms

**“TO YOUR CHILD, YOU ARE A SUPERHERO.
ACT ACCORDINGLY.”**



BE THE CHANGE

Working with the kids in the community, I've been able to listen to them, hear them and connect with them. Everything I'm doing today is based on my life experiences and listening to the needs of these kids.

At some point in my life, I had to develop a blueprint for myself. A lot of these kids don't do that - or don't have role models to help them do that. They're just living in the here and now, instead of thinking on what they're going to do when they turned 18 and enter the real world.

I tell the kids, "You have to develop a blueprint. What is it that you like to do? You like to use your hands? Okay. Let me show you some things where you can use your hands. You like computers? You like video games? Whatever it is that they like. You can create and make your own path, career, and life - doing the things you love."

Why are these kids acting up?

I see a lot of kids getting in trouble in school, because they're struggling in a subject and don't want to be exposed. Instead of "looking stupid," they don't go to school or act up to avoid looking ignorant. That's their solution, just like it was mine. At one of my speaking engagements, I was walking a group of future teachers through a scenario:

I'm like, "You have little Billy here. He's been cutting up and he's bad."

"Don't assume little Billy is bad. Some of the little Billies I've come across just watched their moms overdose on drugs the night before. Now they're at school trying to be normal kids. Put yourself in their shoes. You just watched your mom or dad overdose on drugs. Are you going to go to work the next day? Are you going to be able to function?"

I do a lot of speeches that focus on this same subject. and school mentoring, where I go to our middle schools and I get the kids who are generally in school suspension on a weekly basis. I'll take in donuts and breakfast pizzas and stuff like that. We sit down and we just chat. I tell them my life story and how I could've ended up in jail or dead.

When I tell kids that, they start looking at themselves and going, "I need to get my life together."

That's the hope and goal. So, how do we make that happen?



5 LESSONS FOR PARENTS

Take it from me, the relationships I have with some of my older kids are much different than the relationships with my younger kids, when I finally figured it out.

1. *Stop trying to be your child's best friend.* That's not your role. You're the parent and you need to lead by example. I tell parents all the time, "If you're out there smoking weed, drinking, partying, having five or six different partners walking in and out of your house – your kids see that and think it's a normal way of life. It's not normal or healthy. I'm not saying you have to stop all that bad behavior, but cut it back and know when and where to do it. Kids model their behavior after their parents. Kids love that. You are an example, so be a good one.

2. *Get involved.* I see a lot of parents dropping their kids off at their grandparents every weekend, so the parents can go party it up all weekend. Look, you made the choice to be a parent. You know what you signed up for, so start being a parent. Stop going out and kicking it; it's about them now. Sure, you need to set aside some time to do your own thing, but it shouldn't be on a frequent basis. Your kids need you. I know some kids who spend so much time at their grandparents' house that they're calling their grandparents "mom and dad." What's wrong with that picture? Seriously, it's not okay. That's crazy.

3. *Sometimes, you need to shut up and listen.* When your kid does something wrong or gets into trouble, don't judge them, just listen. I understand that sometimes your kids will say something really stupid that will blow your mind and make you lose your cool and want to jump off a bridge. I've been there "woosahing" while I'm listening to my kid's ridiculous story. But I've gotten to a point where I really wanted to understand what my child is thinking. What

was their thought process and what needs to change? When you start thinking about things that way, it makes things so much easier and builds trust in your relationship. If your kids don't trust you, they won't communicate with you. Then you leave them to confide in others on the streets or other people who want to advise them for their own personal gain.

4. Be proactive. Every child I interact with, I know they're going through something. I don't know what it is that makes it so different for me, except that I'm really paying attention. I sit there and look at them, watching their body language and everything about them like, "What's going on with you?" And that's the thing. A lot of times, kids just want somebody to ask them what's going on or they want to feel like they have somebody to talk to. Ask them, "Are you alright? Everything good? Tell me what's going on." When you do that, the floodgates open, man. It's like if they had more people to do that, then maybe it would be easier for them to get on track. But so many people just walk by our youth and don't even think to ask them, "How are you? How was your day? What's going on?"

5. Show up. I see a lot of kids getting awards or recognition, and their parents are nowhere to be found. You see these kids hopelessly looking around and searching for their loved ones. If kids are looking for their parents or loved ones and don't see them, they feel distraught and defeated. I understand that parents have to work, but if you can be there, be there. Your absence is hurting your child. They feel like, "Nobody cares, so why am I doing all this good work." That's when we lose a kid who is doing something really, really good because the people they care about don't care about them.



A TWISTED TALE OF FATHERHOOD

We talk a lot about healthy family relationships. One of the biggest issues around here seems to be father/kid relationships.

I've been in rooms where kids were asked the following questions:

"How many of you love your moms? Raise your hands."

- All hands raise -

"How many of you love your grandmas?"

- All hands raise -

"How many of you love your dads?"

- Not even half the hands raise -

I picked one kid to dig a bit deeper

Me: Why don't you love your father?

Kid: Because my dad doesn't love me.

Me: Why would you say your dad doesn't love you?

Kid: My dad lives two blocks away with another woman and her kids.

I don't see him at all.

Kids feel that. Do we want to know why our kids are angry and acting out? That's a great reason right there.

A lot of men don't realize the impact that not being there has on their kids. It's eye-opening to be in a room full of children where you ask those questions and no

hands come up. I get kids that come up to me and say, "Officer Sharpe, I wish you were my dad."

No kid should have to say that, but that's what they need in their lives. A lot of dads are out there shucking and jiving, and everything else – except for being a dad. Letting all their own worries overshadow their children, when all they had to do was show up.

You need to get your priorities straight. If you need help figuring out what the right priorities are, let me help you with that.

Your number one default priority is your children.



5 LESSONS FOR OUR YOUTH

1. *Develop your own positive circle.* Don't put any squares in your circle. Squares are a symbol of negativity. If someone isn't trying to achieve the same dreams as you (or trying to help you achieve them), they don't need to be in your circle. A lot of kids say, "But that's my friend." And I understand that. But if your friend is doing something that is going to cost you or affect you negatively, then they aren't being a good friend to you.

2. *Develop a blueprint.* Ask yourself what do you need to do. On your personal journey, what are the right things you need to do to reach that destination? Sometimes on your journey, you need to travel light. You don't need to take all the bad luggage with you. Kids need to understand that they can leave that luggage behind. You don't need it. It's going to weigh you down; it's going to bring you down. So why take it with you?

3. *Work on your family relationships.* Some kids treat their friends better than they treat their parents and family. A lot of friends come and go, but your family is forever. So as you're going on this personal journey and sometimes you stumble, you might have to fall back and need somebody to lean on. Guess what? Some of your so-called "friends" aren't going to be there. It's going to be your parents and your family who are going to be there.

4. *Focus on the things you like to do.* What do you like to do? Do you like to use your hands? Do you like to be creative? Do you like numbers? Once we find out what the kids like to do, it makes it real simple to help them build a solid blueprint. I say, "Here. These are some things that might make sense for you to do. Okay, now here are some things that you need to focus on to make your dream a reality."

5. *Always push forward.* Never stop becoming the best version of yourself.

Nobody is perfect, but if you're getting better all the time, you will find happiness and fulfillment. People have a tendency to let their pasts define them, but if you're always looking back at your negative circumstances, it makes it a lot harder to move forward. Kids need to learn this lesson early on. Learn from past mistakes. Take the lesson with you and move on to make yourself better.

Life is a personal journey. Travel light. Don't carry useless, negative luggage with you.



EVIDENCE FILES #1

J'Mon Wells

One of "my kids", J'Mon grew up in a bad neighborhood here in Canton, Ohio. It was a bad situation. This kid reminds me of me. I coached him in football and watched him and felt that he was about to make some bad decisions and mistakes. I used to sit outside of his residence while I was working on my police shift. At first, he avoided making contact with me. Even though he knew me, in those neighborhoods, it's not cool to be talking to the police. I sat there and I'd wave to him and he'd come over and talk to me.

"Why are you sitting outside my house?" He'd say.

"Because I want to make sure that you're safe. I want to make sure nothing happens over here. Plus, if I'm sitting here and you think about doing something stupid, you're going to do it."

J'Mon straightened up and built a blueprint. And guess what? He's now a deputy sheriff. He has a daughter and it's all just amazing. I'm so proud of this dude and now I'm watching him do the same thing I'm doing with kids in his area. I'm so super proud of him.

That's when you know this thing is working, when you hear success stories like that.



A CALL TO ARMS

I know I say it a lot, but you have to be the change you want to see in the world. Just think if everybody did that. Just think if ten people you know did that together. Companies, causes, and real positive impact has come from groups much smaller than ten people. Just by being proactive, you could be the spark needed to start a long-lasting fire of positive change in the community and the world.

We have to get involved and stop worrying about our own. We worry about our own so much. "I'm only worried about my family." Okay, I understand that because I worry about my family, too. But I also worry about this community and your family. And his family. And her family. And that kid.

Stop sitting on your butt and worrying only about yourself. When you're only worried about yourself, bad stuff comes landing right on your front door. Be proactive and take responsibility for this world.

Become the change you want to see in the world at

www.lamarsharpe.com

www.beabetterme.org

If you or someone you know has a truly positive message that the world needs to hear, visit

www.aaron-mcmahon.com

