

# Tobyhanna students hear story of determination: From NYC foster child to Lehigh Valley CEO

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January 06, 2010 12:00 AM

Just after laying their mother to rest, Nathaniel Williams and his 11 siblings found themselves orphaned, and faced with an unimaginable choice.

Five taxi cabs queued outside the funeral home. Workers from New York City's child welfare agency told Williams, then 5, and his fellow siblings to pair up and get into a cab. Whichever taxi they chose would take them to their new home.

He and his younger brother, then 2, climbed into a cab that took them to a foster home. It marked the beginning of 13 years of upheaval and dislocation. The family drifted apart, gathering only at the funerals for four of the siblings.

Despite the setbacks that could have doomed him, Williams has succeeded, becoming president and CEO of HumanWorks Affiliates, a human services organization based in the Lehigh Valley with a \$10 million annual operating budget.

Last month, he came to Tobyhanna Elementary Center to share with fifth-graders his story, his philosophy of success and the attitude that has sustained him.

It is part of a continuing series that Assistant Principal Phyllis Cournan has devised for the school's fifth-grade students to reinforce ideas of perseverance, making good choices and maintaining academic motivation.

They also have heard from a local man who was raised in the projects of upper Manhattan and now runs a recreation program; the district's superintendent; and a girl who, despite suffering from a rare condition that has left her with one leg and one arm, competes as a downhill skier.

Williams, who lives in Northampton County, said he read an account of one of those speakers in the Pocono Record. He contacted Cournan and asked what he could do to help.

"It's very powerful what she's doing," he said.

Much of his lecture to the Tobyhanna students dealt with resilience, a quality that child psychologists identify as both powerful and common. It has been called "ordinary magic" by Ann Masten, distinguished professor at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, who for decades has studied resilience in children raised homeless or amidst war, poverty or disaster.

"Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities," Masten wrote, "but from the everyday magic of ordinary human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities."

These factors draw on internal and external forces: a positive connection to caregivers, nurturing adults, schools or friends; intellectual skills; the ability to maintain self-control; a positive view of one's self; and a sense of meaning in life, among others, according to Masten.

Williams described having some of these factors in his early life, but not others. While his opportunity to

form attachments to adults was limited, he had keen intuitive skills and an ability to reflect.

He remembered a moment of insight, when, as a boy, he sat on the porch of an administration building of an agency. A nun who ran it, whom he called Sr. Mary Patrick, told him he looked very sad. She disappeared and came back with a bicycle for him.

"I recognized that this was the way my life was going to be," he said during a recent telephone interview. The sadness of his circumstances could dictate his life. He wanted something different.

"I could sit there and feel sorry for myself or I could do something about it," he said. "I think, in that bicycle situation, I realized that I have to stand up differently."

"That's what resilience is," he continued. "You go back informed — not just by the good things, but also by the challenges as well."

Williams said he started mimicking Sr. Mary Patrick. He started signing his name "Nathaniel Williams, Executive Director." It was the same title the nun held.

He went on to college, and then earned four graduate degrees: a master's in human services from Lincoln University, a master's in public administration from Cheyney University, and a master's in business administration from Strayer University. He later earned a doctorate in education from Fielding Graduate University.

And, at 26, he was executive director of his own nonprofit. Now, the organizations he oversees provide group homes, foster care and other supports for children. He has written six books and hosts a weekly Internet talk show.

In part, he credits taking the first step — adding the title after his boyhood signature.

"If it isn't put in writing, it won't happen," he said.

He stressed the same message to the Tobyhanna students. He drummed in the importance of being responsible, resilient, recognizing one's own talents, respecting others, and trying again, or renewing one's efforts. Williams has dubbed them the "Five Rs."

After his visit on Dec. 16, Williams said he received a thank-you card from the students, in which they recited the Five Rs.

"They just were unbelievably kind," he said of the card. "It made me cry."