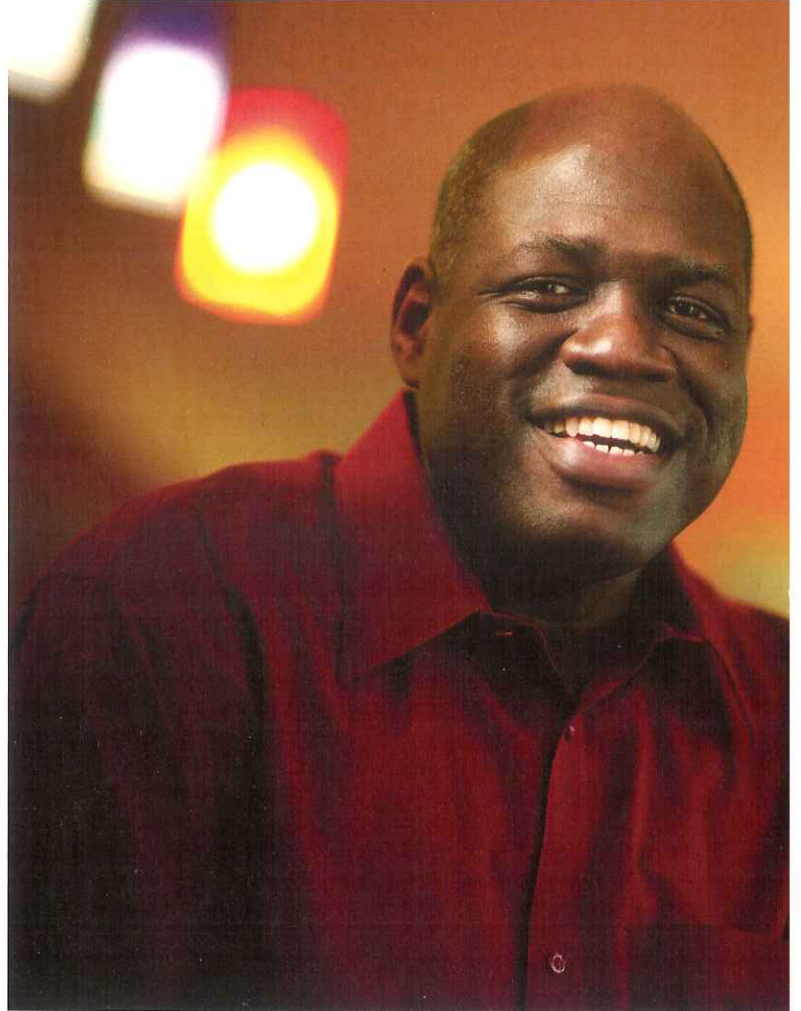


Fostering Success

Nathaniel Williams overcame his childhood in foster care. Now the founder of HumanWorks helps others do the same.

by K. SHELBY SKRHAK



Nathaniel Williams has penned seven books about letting go of the past and other topics, but he's never written about the tragic, foundation-shaking event from his childhood that made him an expert in the subject.

Williams, founder and CEO of Pennsylvania-based social services group HumanWorks Affiliates, was thrust with his 11 orphaned siblings into the New York City foster care system when he was 5 years old. Today, as a successful entrepreneur, CEO and motivational speaker, he helps children and adults with similar circumstances break free of their difficult pasts, to find success in all aspects of their lives.

His mother was single and struggling financially, physically and mentally when she went to a hospital emergency room for a severe headache. After triage, doctors sent her home with elevated blood pressure.

She took a few steps out the door, collapsed in the hospital parking lot and later died. With no father in the picture, Williams and his siblings were orphaned—forcing social services to divvy them up in five foster homes and later shuffle them between group homes.

"There wasn't a family member that was willing to take all of us in," Williams says, commenting that social services should have explained more thoroughly to his extended family members that taking in all nine children under age 18 was not the only option. Instead, five taxi

cabs waited at the funeral home, where Williams and his brothers and sisters had just laid their mother to rest. Social services asked them to pair up with a sibling and choose a cab—the destination would be their new foster home.

Williams and his younger brother spent several years in a foster home, then, a group home until he "aged out" of the system at 18. Williams rarely saw his siblings during childhood and, since then, mostly at family funerals; at 45, he's already lost a sister and three brothers to disease and one to overdose.

Living in a group home campus, Williams was the one on whom other kids depended. "I was very serious and businesslike," he says. "I even wore a shirt and tie every day." In high school, Williams was an achiever, participating in a work-study program for adults

"I finally realized that if you want something different, you gotta do something different."

with mental retardation, which likely piqued his interest in social services. But while Williams was a mature, well-rounded young man upon graduation, his 20s were more difficult; the effects of his challenging childhood resurfaced in other areas of his life.

"Unbeknownst to me, for almost 35

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Breaking Past *Your* Past

Nathaniel Williams explains how challenging events can "show up" in all aspects of your life, without your realizing the effect they have. In his book *The Affordability Factor*, Williams encourages readers to write down the challenging events that have shaped their lives and evaluate the effects they have on these areas:

- ✦ Health
- ✦ Spirituality
- ✦ Environment
- ✦ Education
- ✦ Family and friends
- ✦ Recreation
- ✦ Finances
- ✦ Personal development
- ✦ Feelings/thoughts as a result of the challenging life event

Williams says the act of writing these events down, and then systematically thinking through every aspect of one's life, is therapeutic for putting the events into proper perspective.



years, I stood at the foot of my mother's casket, angry and frustrated," Williams says. "I was short-visioned in what I expected of my life. I didn't see things through, and I didn't have the tenacity to stick with them. My patience was limited. I felt friends were very expendable. Even my finances I wasn't concerned about because no one in my family had lived past the age of 50, so I thought, 'What's the point of saving for the future?'"

Though he was going to school, earning degrees and gaining rank in various social services positions, his mindset was holding him back more than he realized at the time. "I was standing in my own way," he says. "I

finally realized that if you want something different, you gotta do something different."

Williams set about "reframing" his past by viewing it in a different light.

He reflected on his mother's death and time spent as an orphan; he could easily be a victim and let his future failure be the result of his past hardships, but he chose not to do this. "I learned something very impactful from a colleague, who likened our lives to a long train journey," Williams says. "I'm on a train ride that my mother is on with me. There are stops that she would have expected me to take, and I'll make those, but I'm going to make some stops that'll surprise her and make her proud, too. It's all part of life's journey.

"But the most impactful statement was what my colleague said about the death of a parent," Williams recalls. "She said, 'Your parents are with you for as long as they need to be.' I'd never heard anything so brazen about death, but it really helped me reframe in my mind what had happened and how I could learn from it."

Williams expands this idea in his book *The Affordability Factor: The 4 C's of Change*. "Transform the loss of a parent from an experience of abandonment and isolation to an understanding that your parent was with you as long as he or she could be. He or she gave you the blueprint to be all you can be," he writes.

With that blueprint, Williams uses his experience to teach others how to reframe their past to create a more successful future. As an author, Williams has written books that cover topics such as management, leadership, change, education and social services. He also hosts a self-help television show in Philadelphia



Family First

Orphaned at the age of 5 with 11 siblings, Williams turned his challenging youth into a helping hand for others and an appreciation for his wife and seven children.

and teaches one night a week at Lincoln University. Williams has earned four graduate degrees, including an MBA, a Master of Public Administration, a Master of Human Services and a doctorate in education. Additionally, Williams and his wife, Tade, have seven children, one of whom is autistic.

He's accomplished more in his 45 years than others who have all the advantages in the world, proving that it's not where you come from that dictates where you're going. "I believe we all have a challenging life event early in our life that throws us for a loop," Williams says. "However, when we become filled with courage, possess conviction and maintain confidence, we position ourselves to overcome the challenging life event and so much more.

"The events that challenge us don't decide our destiny," he says. "Our destiny is decided by how we embrace and utilize the challenges in our lives." **S**

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