

AN ESSAY

Every Life You Touch

By Daryl Jones

DarylJonesBooks.com

I was on the west side of Chicago near a busy intersection. It was a sunny day, and I was walking pass an empty parking lot that happened to be a half-block away from a high school, and just steps away from a small local taco restaurant. It was lunch time and students were scattered everywhere, some walking, some standing alone, and some in groups. A few were leaning against the fence to the parking lot, others were just standing around talking over each other, joking and laughing. I could hear fragments of typical teenager conversations.

As I walked, a group appeared walking towards me from the opposite direction. One of them stood out to me because he was tall, Latino, and he was wearing a green formal military uniform. He had on a full long-sleeve shirt, a tie, and a military suit jacket. The gold round buttons on his uniform sparkled. All of the other guys around him were in their regular street clothes, appropriate for the weather and school.

As the group got closer to me, the young man in uniform looked at me. A sudden look of recognition came across his face, and he gave me a huge smile. “Hey Daryl, it’s me!” He said. “Didn’t I tell you I would do it? I joined the Army! I told you I would do it!”

I didn’t recognize the young man, but he recognized me and he knew my name. I smiled, congratulated him, and acted as if I knew who he was. We stepped to the side and spoke more. As he was telling me his military goals, I could feel something of his essence coming to me. I thought to myself that I knew that voice. He didn’t sound the same as he used to, his voice was deeper now, he was much taller than before, he was more muscular, but I knew this kid. Then his identity came to me.

About five years earlier, I had worked as a summer camp counselor in Wisconsin, shortly after I had gotten out of the military. Most of the campers were inner-city kids from Chicago. As a counselor, I supervised a cabin full of kids ages 12 to 14 years old. He had been one of them.

During my time as a counselor, I learned that the campers were drawn to my military stories. They particularly liked when I would get into character as a Marine Corps Drill Instructor and yell at them. As a way of keeping order in the cabin, I gave all the kids ranks, I would give promotions and demotions, and I would make them do pushups if they said bad words.

At that time, this young man was a short little kid. He was cool, charismatic, and carefree. Unlike many of the other campers, who usually spent one week at the residential camp and then went back to the city for the rest of the summer, this young man stayed. He spent the entire summer with me. After hearing so many of my Drill Instructor impressions, he must have caught the military bug.

Had I not randomly walked pass him that day, I would have never known how I influenced his life. I'm sure he went on to do at least 4 years in the military, if not more, and that decision undoubtedly impacted the rest of his life. But I would not have known.

This made me think about my life. Were there people who changed my life and will never know about it? It made me think about the word "legacy" and a lesson Oprah Winfrey said she learned from the poet Maya Angelou. She shared, "You have no idea what your legacy will be. Your legacy is never one thing. Your legacy is every life you touch and have touched." I'm reminded about how we are all connected. So many people have influenced me, and I have no idea how many people I've touched or influenced. But now I know for sure that I at least touched one.

Copyright © 2026 Daryl Jones. All rights reserved.

Originally published at: DarylJonesBooks.com/essays/every-life-you-touch

For additional essays and audio editions, visit DarylJonesBooks.com