

Boys to Men

Three teens make their way out of the inner city by holding on to their dreams—and each other

By ELLEN SHERMAN



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AMECK HUNT can recall being ten years old, hanging out with friends on street corners in Plainfield, N.J., a city with more than its share of crime and poverty. It was 1983, and down the block, teenagers—boys who a few years earlier dreamed of becoming firefighters or police officers—were selling marijuana and crack. By age 14, they'd lost hope. They were just trying to survive. No way was he going to end up like that. He was going to get out.

But getting out would take more than just a boy's dreams—



Best of Friends—
Sampson Davis, Rameck
Hunt and George Jenkins
(left to right) shared a
vision for their future.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
JOHN MADERE

it would take time, and work, and planning. And it would require the support of a remarkable pair of friends—friends Rameck Hunt had yet to meet.

IN THE BEGINNING, the odds were stacked against him. Hunt's mother, Arlene, had wrestled with a drug problem. His father had done time for nonviolent charges and was seldom around. "For years I thought everybody's pops lived in jail," Hunt says. Rameck and seven relatives lived in a small, crowded house in Plainfield owned by his grandmother, a postal worker who largely supported the extended family on her own. Hunt shared a bed with his mother, uncle and little sister.

Fortunately, he was a natural student. "I liked studying," Hunt says with a smile. "It's not like they had to trick me into it." But the streets, and some tough friends, were a constant distraction. He developed an attitude, and a swagger to go with it. "By about age ten, I started getting into trouble," he says. "Little things—roughing up other kids, stealing. I wasn't a bully inside. It was me trying to emulate my friends."

Whatever her shortcomings, Arlene could see that her son was gifted and should be in a different environment. "You need a good education," she'd tell Rameck. Through a friend, she learned about Newark's University High, a magnet school for gifted students. Hunt, with his

good grades, was admitted, and a new chapter of his life began.

In the fall of 1987, a wary 14-year-old showed up for the first day of school. "I thought there'd be all these geeks and nerds," Hunt says. Instead, he met George Jenkins and Sampson Davis—two guys just like him. Both of them dressed "cool," in jeans and Nikes. Both were smart. And both were growing up in single-parent homes with mothers who wanted more for them. "My mother was a rock," says Jenkins. Echoes Davis, "Mine was determined to make sure her family did well. She was always saying, 'Go to school.'"

All three took the advice to heart, but it didn't always keep them out of trouble. On Thanksgiving eve 1989, Hunt and a handful of friends were drinking beer behind Plainfield's Clinton Elementary School. As Hunt tells it, a crackhead lit up nearby, and Hunt and his pals told the man to get lost. When he didn't, the boys kicked and punched him. "We kept on beating him, then left to get something to eat," Hunt says. They returned to find police waiting. Their victim identified them before being transported to the hospital.

The following morning Hunt awoke not to the smell of roasting turkey, but on the cold floor of the Herlich Juvenile Quarters. "I thought, Wow, I had this bad dream that I got thrown in jail," he recalls. "Then it hit me. I wanted to cry." He spent the holiday and part of the next week in detention. While waiting for a



Not Just Talk—The docs stay in touch with the neighborhood. Kids tell them, "These are my friends—we're gonna have a pact just like you."

court appearance, he was able to look out a window. "I could see kids on their way to school—like I should have been," he remembers. With no previous record, Hunt was released. "You think, This could never happen to me," he says. "But it did. I couldn't let that kind of peer pressure get to me again."

Hunt poured himself even more into his studies. And he spent more time with Jenkins and Davis. The three hung out, shared books, gave one another rides. During their senior year, they made an oath. "It wasn't like a blood oath, but whatever needed to be done, we'd do it for the other guy," says Hunt, "so we could make it out—together."

Jenkins, who for years had dreamed of becoming a dentist, en-

couraged his two friends to apply to Seton Hall University, which offered financial aid to low-income pre-medical and dental students. "I was selfish," Jenkins says with a smile. "I didn't want to go by myself."

When Hunt visited Seton Hall, he liked what he saw. "A whole lotta grass, a whole lotta trees," he says. "No graffiti. It was so pretty."

Carla Dickson, then a student-development specialist, interviewed Hunt. "He wanted to be a success, but he also wanted the program to work, not just for him but for his two friends," she says. "I was so impressed by that." In 1991 the three were among ten recipients of scholarships for the prestigious program.

In many ways, Seton Hall was like a home for Hunt. When he

moved into his dorm room, he had his own bed, desk and phone for the first time in his life. But because fewer than ten percent of Seton Hall's students were African American, Hunt and his two friends sometimes seemed like strangers in a strange land. In the halls, Hunt sometimes felt invisible. "People acted as though we weren't even there. We were just black kids from the ghetto."

The three friends fought the isolation by sticking close to one another. They studied together and looked out for each other. "If I needed money," says Davis, "Rameck was there to see me through."

They took jobs as tollbooth clerks to earn extra cash while maintaining grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. Still, balancing work and study wasn't always easy. "I must have quit college 300 times," Davis recalls. "Then I'd remember I was doing this for more than myself."

Hunt and Davis went on to Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Piscataway. Jenkins stayed in Newark for dental school. At Robert Wood, Hunt sometimes felt that old isolation. During rounds, he'd jump in with his opinion, but his classmates seemed not to hear. "Sometimes I'd [have to] stand in front of them and repeat myself just to make them acknowledge me," he recalls. When school vacations approached, his fellow students would buzz with plans for trips to Europe or the Caribbean. "Where are you going?" they'd ask Hunt, who'd shrug and say, "Oh,

I'll just hang at my apartment."

Each weekend, the three friends got together. "It was important to have that link, to walk this path together," says Davis, "to have someone you could identify with."

ON A SUNNY day in May 1999, Hunt and nearly 1200 other students gathered at a New Jersey amphitheater for graduation. Hunt spotted his mother and grandmother, now wheelchair-bound, applauding in the audience. "No one in our family had ever done something like this," he says. Rameck Hunt, one-time resident of the Herlich Juvenile Quarters, had become Rameck Hunt, M.D. And Hunt's two best friends were embarking on careers as doctors alongside him.

Later, at a celebration party at the Jenkins home, the three doctors accepted congratulations from friends, neighbors, even unknown well-wishers. "To them, if we could do it, they could do it," says Hunt.

The trio took a short vacation—their first—to Cancún. Then Hunt began his residency in internal medicine at Robert Wood, and Davis in emergency medicine at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. Jenkins continued postgraduate studies in dentistry at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

The pact that bound the friends for so long remains strong today because Hunt, Davis and Jenkins want to sustain the next generation. "We

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want them to see education as the way," says Hunt. The story of the three guys who made it out—with professional diplomas—will be told in *The Pact*, a book due out in May. The three doctors have also established the Three Doctors Foundation (www.threedoctorsfoundation.org), an outreach program that will offer mentoring, scholarships and a summer camp for inner-city kids. They speak at universities, to business groups, even at the local library in an effort to spread their message. "The Cosby characters aren't real—they're on TV," Hunt tells kids. "We're living proof you can do it."

All three doctors intend to remain in the Newark area. "People are hanging pictures of us on their kids' walls hoping something rubs off on them," Jenkins says. "We want

to be here for those kids," adds Hunt.

Today, Dr. Davis gives his full attention to an older black patient in the Newark Beth Israel ER. She smiles as if her grandson were in charge. "I want to take care of the people I grew up with," Davis says. On a cool November night, Dr. Jenkins, in an oversize sweatshirt and plaid hat, walks through his old neighborhood. Two kids approach him shyly just to say hi.

At Robert Wood, Dr. Hunt makes rounds. Several medical students listen as he charts a patient's treatment. "It feels good to have them listen," he says. "It feels well deserved."

The three doctors hope to heal their community—not just physically, but by taking on the disease of hopelessness and despair. They seem well on the way to finding a cure.

WALK THIS WAY



One beautiful morning, my husband and I decided to go for a drive in the country. Unfortunately, no matter which road we took, we kept seeing dead possums lying on the shoulder. After several miles of this, my husband turned to me and said, "Now I think I know the answer to the age-old question 'Why did the chicken cross the road?'"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, "it was to prove to the possums that it could be done."

—Contributed by JUANITA PAGE

HOW TRUE

Few mistakes can be made by a mother-in-law who is willing to baby-sit. —*Comedy Comes Clean (Crown)*, edited by ADAM CHRISTING