

During the mid to late 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. paid several visits to my hometown [Grenada, Mississippi]. He traveled to our small town, about 100 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee, to promote African American voter registration and to help desegregate Grenada's public schools. I was one of the young people profoundly influenced by those life-changing visits.

There is a direct line leading from King's time in our rural town of Grenada during the contentious civil rights era to the new location of SAAB's Headquarters in Springfield, Missouri more than 50 years later. In the aspirational group founded by me {Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) or Brother-to-Brother} is an organization devoted to getting young men of color to finish high school and helping them get into college, along with ensuring that they graduate and are encouraged to extend a helping hand to their fellow man and give back to their community. SAAB embraces an ecological framework that recognizes that the fate of young men of color is not solely in their hands. We teach our young men that they are a part of a larger community that must be conscious of their capacity to change the systems and conditions of which they are a part, and they must take ownership in being a part of promoting practices, policies and behaviors that improve their own opportunities as well as for others too.

Like King, I believe that, with SAAB, we can make a breakthrough in solving the quandary of how best to address the social and educational ills of people especially young men of color that has bewildered educators, researchers, sociologists, and others of practitioners and community stakeholders for decades.

My belief is supported by some real-world, data-driven results. From an initiative that I began in 1990 with one group of students, SAAB has now impacted thousands around the country.

To solidify our participants' continued engagement, SAAB formally launched an Alumni Association in July 2018. This robust network of past and present members ensures that SAAB will succeed at its mission: To create and foster a supportive brotherhood in which young men help and care about one another to achieve lives of purpose and success!

Our Idea

SAAB's main objective is shaping young men to become contributing citizens who will be our leaders today and tomorrow. We encourage our members to take ownership once more in embracing a shared commitment with their respective community given service is the cornerstone of our organization, while at the same time embracing our four (4) core values: Accountability, self-discipline, proactive leadership, and intellectual development. Our organizational ethos echoes the philosophy of "Giving Back" that many powerful civic organizations such as Rotary, Kiwanis, United Way and many others share.

Despite the historic challenges we have faced this year with Covid-19 and social injustices, many non-profit leaders and social entrepreneurs have deemed SAAB a game changer in providing the type of healing needed for our country, especially young males of color. SAAB stakeholders have said over the years that they are in awe by our students who continue to rise to confront challenges appropriately and peacefully for their respective community head on with a goal of shaping a community that "cares" along with valuing and validating everyone. We continue to grow in the face of converging and entrenched winds of injustices and a global pandemic. Our efforts to mobilize a generation of diverse, compassionate, and engaged young males of color are vital.

We are convinced that to succeed in college and life, young men of color need more than affirmative action and financial support. SAAB provides the guidance, encouragement, and

social support that young men need in order to define, pursue, and complete their higher education objectives and advance into promising careers, which is no small challenge. Among students who enter college, research shows that only 33 percent of black men earn a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 57 percent of white men. SAAB was established to directly address such disparities.

We feel that young men of color, like others in their community, must develop an understanding of what it means to support and be a member of one's community. Our students drive their own "experience." We challenge them to be a part of the solution within their school and larger communities by manifesting a "brotherhood" of young men committed to lifelong leadership and community service and civic engagement. We challenge our school and institutional administrators to ensure that efforts are increased to educate SAAB participants about the privileges and obligations of citizenship as well as the importance of tolerance and civic responsibility. Our young men take responsibility socially and they hold each other accountable to be exemplary in their community. Through experiential learning opportunities that increase their connections to the community and their understanding of the common good, they create a positive peer community of upwardly mobile males of color committed to "caring." Our research has shown that "caring" is vital to the SAAB experience in that one has to care about "self" before one can genuinely and authentically care about others.

SAAB distinguishes itself from other similar groups (e.g., fraternities) in that to be a member, one must willingly accept the charge to be a role model in the community. Our members are deemed polite, sincere, hardworking, and encouraging because they realize that these characteristics are counter to the popular, but offensive, image of young men of color in

America. Furthermore, our members are strongly encouraged to tutor and mentor middle and high school students as a way to impart the same caring spirit that SAAB seeks to instill in them.

Our Challenge

Colleges and universities around the country are trying an array of approaches to help students persevere and achieve their goals. Some use intensive advising, making sure that students are choosing the courses they need to stay on track for their majors and completing on time. Others offer robust academic support to ensure classroom success. While others focus on keeping financial woes at bay.

Males of color experience such a cacophony of social ills that in SAAB's earlier years, civil rights leaders began openly referring to them as at-risk and endangered.

SAAB targets young men of color directly to create a comprehensive social support system built on the values of service, discipline, leadership, and accountability. Our young men model success and make it okay to look and speak and act and dream differently. Through our efforts in teaching them the importance of being responsible change agents in their community, we build networks at individual colleges and schools as well as provide a national structure linking students together while they are in school and keeping them connected to one another and their respective community after they graduate. We even reach down into high schools to activate those students' aspirations to attend college and to get involved in the community. We are known to have the audacious ultimate goal of changing the national conversation about race and diversity. We are explicit about how guiding young men of color to higher educational attainment and consequent career success will help erase the divide our society has suffered for so long.

The SAAB effect on high school and college persistence has been substantial and sustained.

While the average for all black students to attain a bachelor's degree in six years or less is 40%, SAAB members have an 80% persistence (retention) rate over that fraught first year to second year and that same group has an impressive 6-year graduation rate of 86%.

On top of these material challenges, these same students experience a special type of social isolation because they are raised with continual social messages that suggest that they are undeserving and/or dangerous. The media is replete with stories about “unidentified black and brown males” committing crimes. This criminalization of these young men has ostracized them in ways that breeds a resentment of their own identities and a narrative that perpetuates negative stereotypes about them. A clear and tragic consequence of these stereotypes is a sense that no one cares about them. Thus, the primary reason these young men tell us they join street gangs is that “the gang cares about me.”

While some social programs focus on secondary education, preventing gang adherence and ensuring graduation at the high school level, there is an acute need to ensure college graduation and success for the few who do attend, for they become the role models and the hopeful social entrepreneurs for the next generation. The social system must aim higher given college graduation rates are only slightly higher than high school statistics. SAAB guarantees our participants emotional and academic success compared to similar groups that only fulfill a social role for them. We maintain strict membership requirements unrelated to entertainment or sports given our primary focus is on academic excellence and degree attainment.

Our Strategy

Almost 15 years ago, we established our national headquarters in Toledo, Ohio. Nearing our 30th year, we have more than 350 chapters in 40 states with over 12,000 college and high school

student members. As our efforts have expanded to develop a stronger system of community support for our participants, we have added elements of service, not only to the chapter's home communities, but also service to making the chapters thrive by linking to and building on community strengths and accessing resources and abilities that can be deployed. We are more bottom-up than top-down. Each chapter writes its own strategic plan – in collaboration with its university, college, or school advisor partner – to realize individual goals and recognize what works best for their members. Running the chapters is part of training for success beyond college, especially as it relates to preparing participants for the workforce.

SAAB is one of the most venerable, culturally sensitive organizations of its kind and aims to increase the number of Black and Latino men who graduate from college by creating a positive peer community based on a spirit of caring. In recent years, our organization has grown to more than 350 chapters across college campuses and middle and high schools throughout the United States.

SAAB is now at a critical juncture as it prepares strategically for the next era of work, particularly as we continuously seek to buck the status quo of traditional models by finding ways to innovate and develop creative solutions to addressing one of our country's most pressing problems as it relates to preparing males of color for the postsecondary educational experience. SAAB's goal overall is to improve retention and graduation rates of its participants in order for them to gain successful entry into the 21st century workforce.

The current national landscape for males of color:

- National attention to the development and support of males of color is at its highest levels. This interest is reflected in campaigns and organizational efforts across

educational institutions and nonprofit/philanthropic and governmental sectors. Such efforts are coupled with a shifting emphasis in the educational sector from efforts that focus on admission of diverse populations to more robust efforts to increase retention and graduation rates among the population.

- Educational institutions, in particular, are actively seeking to support efforts that increase educational attainment and expand economic opportunity for underserved and low-income communities. These focus areas reflect a desire to advance national competitiveness in the global market and improve the standard of living for individuals and communities across the nation. There is a particular focus on improving these areas by building the capacity of educational institutions to adequately support low-income and underrepresented students, and by creating effective and successful educational pathways.

Having been taught significant lessons of resiliency over the past nine months, SAAB is in a unique position to capitalize on current trends, given our mission to help young men excel academically, socially, culturally, professionally, and in the community. One influential philanthropic professional described SAAB as being one of our nation's "top 5" males-of-color-focused organizations. While there are questions about the sustainability of current national efforts to support males-of-color initiatives in general, the current socio-political climate represents an opportunity for SAAB to raise its organizational profile and influence the institutions that recognize and value the assets of males of color have across sectors throughout the country. We have come to recognize that SAAB students must engage other community members, leaders and students through community education, awareness raising and engagement

efforts through coalition building activities like town hall and civic organization meetings, and connections with local churches.

SAAB engages young males of color as a concerned community of stakeholders committed to teaching one another social responsibility through peer mentoring, mentoring younger students, and belonging to an intentional community of empathetic and contributing citizens who own and exemplify social responsibility commitment to their community by amplifying our motto: “I am My Brother’s Keeper, and together we will rise.” The first part of this phrase is a reversal of a biblical betrayal. In the story of Cain and Able, Cain kills his brother Abel and is asked of his whereabouts by their father. He carelessly replies, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” SAAB members declare that they are, in fact, responsible for one another. We have found that it is important to instill a sense of community ownership within our organizational culture infrastructure to drive the type of cooperation from our students necessary to yield a willingness within them to go above and beyond on a daily basis.

This positive sense of belonging is emotionally stabilizing and inspiring as well. The second part of the phrase is an affirmation of that togetherness and a denial of the death knell sounded against black and brown males during SAAB’s origin. The image of rising is synonymous with achieving true freedom, which can seem unattainable in the current culture of frugality.

SAAB members live out this creed through regularly scheduled teachable moments and community service projects that they collaboratively work with to address ills directly impacting them and are affecting a culture that is bereft of leadership and positive peer pressure.

Our graduates/alumni are active and empowered citizens with the capacity to share their powerful gifts of caring and responsibility with others. They are our future and continuously represent the promise for a community that is starving for their leadership!! As we often ask our

young men at different stages throughout their “SAAB Experience” -- Who will benefit from who you are destined to become?

“What are you doing to help others?” -- Martin Luther King, Jr.