

Mr. Ameer Baraka – Testimony

Good morning Senators. I want to thank you for taking your valuable time to listen to my message. We are coming upon an important Presidential election and I know your time is important. I'm also not oblivious to the challenges we face as a country. One such challenge is the life-long curse of Dyslexia. One out of five people live with this challenge each day of their lives, so many will never reach their full potential and enjoy this great country as you and I do. So many people have lost the will to believe because the enemy, Dyslexia, has forced them into the shadows. But today we have found a new way to address this enemy once and for all.

For many years, I allowed Dyslexia to control my life and rob me of my God given potential. Can you imagine in your early teens never wanting to be anything other than a drug dealer? Neither my mother, nor my school teachers, were able to diagnose the reasons why I had trouble learning. In my mind, pursuing more formal education wasn't relevant. I knew early in life that being a dentist, physical therapist, or lawyer was out of my reach because I couldn't read. I turned to quicker pathways out of the New Orleans projects. I saw men in my community making a way for themselves, without having to read, by selling drugs. And my defeatist attitude seemed to outweigh the positive values my grandmother tried to teach me. There were many more ingredients that helped me make my decision to sell drugs, for example, having my mother and siblings call me names like "stupid" and "dumb." Using names such as these can cause any child to feel hopeless and lost.

You will notice, I never mention my father in this presentation. That's because he left when I was three years old to chase his dreams of finding a better grade of heroin to use. It was the perfect storm for me. I chose to succumb to my environment while both my brother and sister excelled in school. I didn't care about my future, or anyone else, because I thought I was a dummy like my mother and siblings said I was.

I became a street thug and full of anger because I felt cheated out of an education. I went to school just because I had to as a kid. Many Fridays, I would "malinge" because I couldn't pass the spelling test, or I would sleep in a project hallway until school was out just to avoid embarrassment. I pushed myself into a hole that I couldn't get out of. My teachers had to know that I couldn't read. My young mother ran the streets and didn't seem to value my education. But what became the final thing that caused me to pledge my allegiance to the lies of the streets was a girl. I was in sixth grade and a girl I liked was in my class. It was the first week of school. We were in English class and the teacher called on me to read out loud. My palms began to sweat. It felt like drops of blood on my forehead. I couldn't pronounce any of the words and the teacher made me continue, knowing I couldn't read. Some students laughed, while others looked in amazement. From that day forward, I knew that school wasn't the place for me, and the young lady, never really liked me much from that day forward. The streets became my classroom and looking back, the lessons I learned were shameful. I shot and killed a young person because the streets taught me that is how you resolve conflict. After my release from prison at 15 years of age for manslaughter, I got back into the drug game, still never learning to read. I ended up doing prison time as an adult.

I ran from the law for four years as a fugitive because I was facing 60 years for distribution of cocaine and I was guilty. I ended up doing four years because, by God's grace, a jury found me guilty of a lesser charge. At age 23, I entered into a prison correctional facility reading at a third grade level. I didn't feel so bad because many of the men there were just like me. We all read poorly. But after reading the Autobiography of Malcolm X and discovering that he dropped out in seventh grade and still made something of himself, I thought for the first time in my life that I could accomplish something too. I worked hard, writing down each word I had trouble pronouncing. I just kept memorizing words and writing letters and reading short books. A GED teacher noticed that I struggled with phonics and had me tested. He asked if my siblings read well. I told him they went to college. After testing me, he said I had a reading disability and it could be corrected if I was willing to work hard. I would write things down wrong so I sat in the front of class and double checked my answers. I worked for four years trying to attain my GED. My reading ability had surged and I was ready for the test. I passed and started helping others in math and vocabulary. Since my release from prison, I went on to model for clothing lines such as Nike. Also, I took acting classes and worked with Academy Award winners Jessica Lang, Kathy Bates, Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, Blair Underwood, Hill Harper and many others. I have produced four independent films and written my first book titled 'The Life I Chose: The Streets Lied to Me.' It is meant to inspire others who are just like I was, hiding in the shadows and not getting help. It is for those who believe that dealing drugs is a way out. Today there are schools available to help kids fight and defeat Dyslexia. Schools, such as the one Senator Cassidy and his wife have created, provide a model for what could be a solution. In my opinion we can stop people from allowing the Dyslexia to rob them of all that this great nation has to offer. If we understand this enemy, we can work to prevent it from stealing our most fundamental asset, our youth. We need to remember that 1 in 5 has dyslexia and dyslexia is 80 to 90 percent of the LD or learning disability community. The science about dyslexia, where the problem is in the brain, may be the key to reversing the curse of Dyslexia that is now plaguing this great country.