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Return Investment

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Return Investment

Chicago's Cabrini–Green may be best known for its violent past, but Danny Sherrod '03 sees it as a neighborhood with a future, and a place that he has always called home.

Story by **SUSAN DEGRANE**

Portrait photos by **LLOYD DEGRANE**



“I came home and started a company and gave people jobs,” Sherrod says. “I’ve put my own personal profit aside, basically. I’ve paid people good wages and put the money back into the business.”

Sherrod, 27, was one of four honorees named a Shining Example for 2006 by the Associated Colleges of Illinois (ACI), a group of 24 private colleges and universities that includes Illinois Wesleyan University. This year’s awards — built around the theme “The Road to College Success” — honored ACI alumni who “overcame significant obstacles, achieved success in their chosen fields, and are outstanding role models.”

The seven-story apartment building still stands at the western edge of Cabrini–Green, a massive public housing complex that at one time sheltered 15,000 low-income residents on Chicago’s North Side. Slated for demolition, the structure at 1121 N. Larrabee once straddled a dangerous vortex of three gang territories. Cobras to the north. Vice Lords to the east. Gangster Disciples to the west. Smack in the middle of what locals called “the triangle of death.”

Scarred by years of violence and neglect, this may seem anything but a place to call “home,” but for Danny Sherrod '03, the building once was that and much more.

The fifth of eight children, Sherrod has fond memories of playing with his siblings and with children from other families living in the 200-unit structure.

Here is where his mother, Evelyn Burks, taught him and her other children to “do your best, nothing but the best,” “always have a positive thought in your head,” “keep busy with constructive activities,” “work hard,” “don’t just talk, take care to listen,” “believe in God,” and “never hit a woman.”

So grounding were the lessons taught by his mother that on Father’s Day 2006, Sherrod bought her a case of lobster, “because,” he says, “she’s my mother and my father.”

Sherrod’s father stepped out of his life early on, a fact upon which Sherrod does not care to elaborate. Even so, he is not bitter about his early life. “I wouldn’t change my life,” he says. “We learned survival skills.”

Today, Sherrod remains involved with public housing and helps others. He works as assistant property manager at the Harold Ickes Homes, a 1,600-unit complex which serves as temporary housing for Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) residents making housing transitions. The job places Sherrod in direct contact with residents affected by the CHA's massive transformation from high-rise apartment buildings to smaller buildings and scattered-site townhouse units.

Initially, the plan sparked much bitterness and resentment among residents, displacing some 27,000 and requiring another 15,000 to relocate within available public housing until renovations of remaining units and construction of new ones are complete. Even so, Sherrod believes it's "a good thing because it's upgrading people's living accommodations and making more people responsible for their own outcomes."

Sherrod's job, which includes serving eviction papers to residents who have violated public-housing rules, can be "rough at times," as he describes it. But while some residents may not be happy to see him, still others count on him to put them in touch with needed social services. "I try to let them know we're here," he says. "I try to be respectful and professional. I don't make promises. I try to let them know what options they do have."

Sherrod also launched and operates his own contracting and construction business, the Sherrod Group. So far, rehabbing single-family homes for private owners has been the mainstay of the business, but Sherrod is bidding for Chicago Housing Authority contracts for scattered-site housing.

Since Sherrod established his business in June 2004, he and the 20 individuals he employs have completed 20 renovations. The work has included removing old woodwork, walls, roofing, plumbing, and wiring; installing roofs, windows, floors, woodwork, and cabinets; and painting, plastering, drywalling, tuck-pointing, and high-pressure washing of basement floors and exteriors.

"I came home and started a company and gave people jobs," he says. "I've put my own personal profit aside, basically. I've paid people good wages and put the money back into the business." Many construction firms pay laborers \$5 and \$6 an hour, says Sherrod who pays workers between \$9 and \$13. Many of those workers are employed part-time among some of Cabrini-Green's remaining residents. The firm also gives non-paid internships to students at Dawson Technical Institute. In some cases, those internships have led to employment with Sherrod's company.

"I believe in helping others through my business," says Sherrod, who responded to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina by driving to New Orleans with a five-man crew to repair and paint two hotels in the La Quinta chain. He helped in other ways, too. "At night, I'd volunteer, asking people if they needed help," he says. "A whole lot of people were just waiting for supplies."

Sherrod lives in the row-house portion of Cabrini-Green, near his mother and two younger sisters, and he is helping to raise his 3-year-old nephew. He plans to purchase a home before the end of the year, preferably, he says, on Chicago's South Side. Yet before moving on, one sunny day last July, Sherrod decided to revisit his first childhood home.

The Larrabee Street structure Sherrod resided in for the first 13 years of his life is now boarded up and ghostly quiet, except for the fluttering of pigeons that roost in the upper stories. He has not taken a good look at it in several years, though it's just a few blocks from his current address on the 900th block of Mohawk Street. "When my family moved to the row houses, that seemed a world away," he says.

Surveying the freshly mowed fields where massive, 19-story high rises once towered above acres of blacktop, he says, "This is my 'hood. ... For all of its vices, violence, poverty, and drugs, it's still community."

While much of the violence has abated, police cameras mounted atop poles nearby constantly flash their blue lights, the telltale sign of a high-crime area.

Condos and scattered-site public housing will eventually replace Sherrod's childhood home, according to Karen Pride, a CHA spokesperson. Still, for now the signs of a hardscrabble childhood remain.

"See those milk crates with the bottoms cut out?" Sherrod asks, pointing two stories up to two red crates secured inside of the mesh-covered walkways where children once played. "That's what we used for basketball hoops when we were little. Yeah, that's how we did it in the projects."

Sherrod comes upon a crab-apple tree at the back of the building and recalls what fun he and his friends had throwing the fruits that wielded a stinging *whack*. Then another memory hits him like a bolt of lightning. When he was only 8 years old, he explains, he was jumped by a member of the Cobra gang who was trying to take away Sherrod's new scooter which his mother had bought for him. A fight ensued, during which the gang member cut Sherrod's wrist with a knife. He lost so much blood from the injury that he passed out.

Family members took Sherrod to a nearby fire station and he was eventually transported to a local hospital for stitches. He still bears the scar from the injury. Even so, at the tender age of 8, he held his ground against an armed boy two or three years his senior. The Cobra fled, never to be seen again. "He did not get that scooter," Sherrod says resolutely, then laughs. "No, he did not. Now, that was a true fight to the death."

There were other fights — with rescues made by older brothers — and frequent barrages of gang crossfire, which made walking to the nearby Jenner Elementary School a deadly proposition.

"Once you got to school you were safe," says Sherrod, who served as a crossing guard in 1992 on the day that fellow schoolmate, 7-year-old Dantrell Davis, was killed while walking the morning gauntlet at the other side of the school. That incident made national news, and Sherrod claims it was "the nail in the coffin for all public housing on a massive scale, and the beginning of the end of public housing as we knew it."

Observing his own personal reaction to the shooting, Sherrod says, "When you grow up in a place like this — and this is me talking years later — you're like, 'Wow, somebody got shot. Things are messed up. Things are real messed up.' You learn to duck and cover and wait for an adult or a police officer to say it's okay to get up. And then you have to move on with your life."

It seems Sherrod often managed to move on, or forward, by being resourceful. At age 8, he decided he wanted money for candy. Instead of joining a gang or dealing drugs to earn money, he began bagging groceries after school for \$25 a week. What he didn't spend on candy, he turned over to his mom to help out with daily expenses.

Even so, gang activity in the projects and recruitment efforts intensified as Sherrod turned 10, and still he managed to resist. "In my mother's words," he says, "we were our own gang." For a moment he pauses and smiles as if amused. "Plus, I would have had to face her. That would be far worse than dealing with gangbangers."



Sherrod takes in the desolate view at his childhood home, a public housing structure that now stands empty and will be demolished. With support from his mother and teachers, he was able to avoid the lure of gangs and drugs that consumed the lives of many in his neighborhood.

While Sherrod's life set him worlds apart from his college peers, he wasn't the stereotypical child growing up in the projects, either. As his mother tells it, he spent lots of time reading books, practicing the viola, and participating in after-school enrichment programs. "He was like a nutty-professor type," Burks says. "He loved reading; he was like a bookworm."

Stimulating his academic growth was Sherrod's participation in the Little Cabrini tutoring program for elementary students and the Cabrini Connections Tutor/Mentor Program for high school students. Although he didn't realize it at the time, his involvement in the program gave Sherrod his first Illinois Wesleyan connection: Daniel Bassill — a 1968 IWU graduate and a 2004 ACI Shining Example award-winner — established Cabrini Connections in 1992.

Sherrod's hard work paid off. He graduated first in his class from Jenner Elementary School and was one of six valedictorians at Near North Career Metropolitan High School, which closed in 2001.

"He was a terrific influence on other students," recalls Alan Pulaski, a former hospitality-management teacher at Near North. "These were the years when vocational schools, like Near North, were attempting to integrate with regular academic subjects — English, math, and science. We studied Junior Great Books. ... Danny took to it like a duck to water and truly stimulated the discussions.

"He liked to argue but never made the other person feel bad, never put them down. He was a natural politician. ... He also had this leadership thing. He helped people realize their potential," says Pulaski, recalling that Sherrod orchestrated a major class project, a banquet celebration and awards program that involved several fellow students.

Also observing Sherrod's charisma was Justin Bradley, a volunteer for Cabrini Connections who served as Sherrod's primary mentor during his high school years. "He was one of the people who was well-respected," Bradley says. "Among the other kids, he seemed to hold a great degree of credibility. ... Danny could be very persuasive. When Danny had occasion to speak up about something, his voice was listened to. In impromptu debates, he has a definite skill that could be honed. ... I think he held a lot of sway with people."

Bradley was aware that Sherrod was a bright student, having witnessed his rapid reading-comprehension skills. Bradley himself had earned a B.A. in economics from Illinois Wesleyan in 1992, and the school seemed like a strong possibility for Sherrod.

Sherrod had interviews with other schools, but he chose Illinois Wesleyan because "the way it was presented to me, it made it seem like they wanted me there," he says. "Also, I was from a small high school, and Illinois Wesleyan was small. I didn't want to be a number."

At the start of his first year, Sherrod brought only a duffel bag stuffed with clothes and an outsized work ethic. In order to put himself through school, he says he worked 45 hours a week. That work included setting up sound systems for visiting campus speakers which afforded him opportunities to get up close and personal with activists such as Coretta Scott King and her son Martin Luther King III, as well as a bevy of big-name academics.



Sherrod smiles after receiving his diploma during 2003 Commencement.

internship in Illinois Senator Dick Durbin's office in 2002, helping downstate residents with public housing concerns.

"He was a very hard worker," says Bill Houlihan, the downstate director for Durbin's office, who worked directly with Sherrod. "If someone tells him no, he doesn't give up. He talks to someone else until he finds the way.

"He also really seemed to care about people," Houlihan says. "But the one thing that truly set him apart from other interns is he had this incredibly positive attitude that became infectious. Pretty soon the whole staff was in a better mood, had a better attitude, thanks to Danny."

Sherrod hasn't given up his interest in politics. He belongs to the Young Democrats of Chicago's 27th Ward, which includes Cabrini-Green. He recently rewrote the group's constitution and is involved in outreach activities for high school students. When asked what he'd like to do in the future, he says he'd like to become a senator from Illinois.

Which raises another question, one that Sherrod has been asked a lot in recent years: Why, after graduating from college, did he choose to return to his old neighborhood when he could have pursued more lucrative, and safer, options? His answer comes without hesitation: "Coming back home has allowed me to help my family escape the cycle of drugs and poverty that we were locked into.

"My greatest success is happening right now — being in a position where I can be a positive example and help other people."

Adjusting to campus life meant dealing with "culture shock," Sherrod says, adding that his public high school had not equipped him for the academic rigors of college. His grades dipped, and he was put on academic probation. He spent the second semester of his sophomore year and first semester of his junior year in Chicago, attending Malcolm X College in order to bring up his grades. He then returned to Illinois Wesleyan during the spring semester to continue on with his degree.

He managed to keep his grades up, and still maintained a demanding workload, including service as a resident assistant his senior year. Looking back, he praises many of his Illinois Wesleyan professors for enriching his life and for "opening my mind to new ways of thinking and writing." But the most valuable thing he learned while at IWU, he says, was this: "They didn't teach us the answers. They taught us how to get the answers. I can go into any field and get the answers. More importantly, they taught us how to formulate the question."

Sherrod's major in political science sparked his interest in a possible career in government. After being named Senator of the Year by the IWU Student Senate for 2001-02, he served an