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Building Our Future

King Randall

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KING RANDALL

Building Our Future

PREFACE

Law reviews and other legal journals serve an important role in the legal field. The discussions we host, the scholarship we publish, the ideas we consider, and the positions we advance are the future of the law. Law's future may defer to its history. It may correct its past sins. It may, in the course of the American experiment, make new mistakes that will challenge and educate the next generation. In many ways, legal journals are the anvils upon which scholars forge the law's future. For that reason, legal scholarship often has a reputation among academics as an important and admirable pursuit.

Among others in the profession, journals sometimes have a different reputation. Some in the legal field consider scholarly work too theoretical, out of touch, and idealistic to have much bearing on the real-life practice of law. From their perspective, the average person's relationship to law and policy is not intellectual, hypothetical, evolving, or niche; it is part of the reality of everyday life. Academia should not ignore that criticism. Instead, it should seek to bridge the gap between scholarly exploration and real-world implementation.

With this in mind, Liberty University Law Review is privileged to publish the remarks of Mr. King Randall, I. Mr. Randall is not a lawyer, a professor, or an administrator of higher education. As a result, some might find his presence at our Symposium unusual. But Mr. Randall offers uncommon insight into the hard realities of education in the United States. He knows too well the failures of the existing public education system. He wrestles daily with the practical difficulties of educational alternatives—difficulties that must be addressed whatever path America's education takes. Because of his proximity to these problems, he is uniquely equipped to add context and a sense of pragmatism to the scholarly debate surrounding the future of American education.

What follows is an adaptation of Mr. Randall's remarks at the 2024 Liberty University Law Review Symposium. We are grateful to Mr. Randall for his continuing work serving and mentoring America's youth and for his willingness to participate in our Symposium. It is our hope that his contributions will inject urgency and realism into our consideration of educational freedom in the United States.

AUTHOR

Founder of the Life Preparatory School for Boys.

REMARKS

BUILDING OUR FUTURE

King Randall[†]

PREFACE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you so much. It's a real honor to be with you to talk about some of the biggest challenges facing my community in Albany, Georgia—and what my team has learned about those challenges that I think can be applied at scale across the country if we have the will to take action.

Today, I want to briefly share a bit about me; my journey to start my organization, The X for Boys; and what we have learned along the way. If I can leave you with one takeaway today, I hope it's this: anyone has the ability to make a dent in the universe when they see a problem they want to solve. It's all too easy to log onto Twitter (sorry, X) and complain about the state of the world. It's another to get to work building something that *solves* that problem. It's easy to tear down. It's harder to build, but it doesn't have to be that hard.

So many people toy around with what they would do if they started an organization. But they talk themselves out of it before they even get started. They tell themselves they need a big building to start an organization. They tell themselves they need an MBA, or deep pockets, or more experience. The truth is that anyone can get started if they have inspiration. I started The X for Boys out of my home at nineteen years old, teaching kids in my community how to read and write.¹ Looking back, I didn't know everything I needed to know. But I took the most important step—getting started, and then learning along the way.

I was only twenty-one when I opened a new school in my community of Albany, opening the New Life Preparatory School for Boys, that focused on giving young men in our community more opportunities and more shots at success. That sounds young, but if Mark Zuckerberg can launch Facebook at nineteen and Thomas Jefferson can write the Declaration of

¹ See, e.g., *King Randall Makes Men Out of Boys with The X for Boys*, ACCESSWIRE (Nov. 24, 2020), <https://www.accesswire.com/618310/king-randall-makes-men-out-of-boys-with-the-x-for-boys>; Ama Nunoo, Feature, *This 21-Year-Old is Opening a New School in Albany to 'Make Men Great Again'*, FACE 2 FACE AFRICA (Mar. 29, 2021), <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/this-21-year-old-is-opening-a-new-school-in-albany-to-make-men-great-again>; King Randall, I., *The Founding of The X for Boys in Albany, GA*, YOUTUBE (July 22, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2yBgFPRKvI&ab_channel=KingRandall%2CI.

Independence at thirty-three, I think we can begin to look to young people as leaders.² Not leaders in some distant future, but in the here and now.

Our focus is on providing a different kind of education than you'll find in most classrooms—one relentlessly focused on giving young men the skills and capabilities they need to succeed. That includes trade skills—which offer a powerful pathway to the middle class and high-paying careers.³ And that includes reading and writing; the truth is that 93% of the kids I come into contact with can't read.⁴ We found that unacceptable. And thanks to our team, we have achieved an 86% reading comprehension rate.⁵

I'm aware there's only so much we can do in our community if we aren't scaling our efforts to address the larger problem playing out across our culture. Fewer than three in ten children nationally say they read daily last year—a 26% decrease in the number of young people who read for pleasure in their free time since 2005.⁶ Meanwhile, nearly 130 million American adults read below a sixth-grade level.⁷

At the “X” for Boys, we understand the importance of literacy in shaping a young man's future. Our weekly book club not only improves literacy skills but also imparts essential life lessons that contribute to character development. By engaging young men in reading and discussion, we aim to foster a love for learning and equip them with the tools they need to succeed academically and personally.

² See, e.g., Mark Zuckerberg, FORBES, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/mark-zuckerberg/?sh=5a30d9763e06> (last updated Apr. 5, 2024); White House Hist. Ass'n, *Thomas Jefferson*, WHITE HOUSE, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/thomas-jefferson/>.

³ See generally *About Us*, THE X FOR BOYS, <https://thexforboys.org/about-us> (last visited Apr. 8, 2024).

⁴ See generally *id.*

⁵ *About Us*, THE “X” FOR BOYS, <https://thexforboys.org/about-us> (last visited Apr. 8, 2024, 8:59 P.M.).

⁶ *Children and Young People's Reading in 2023*, NAT'L LITERACY TRUST, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2023/> (last updated Sep. 13, 2023).

⁷ Emily Schmidt, *Reading The Numbers: 130 Million American Adults Have Low Literacy Skills, But Funding Differs Drastically By State*, APM RSCH. LAB (Mar. 16, 2022), <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/10x-adult-literacy>.

Above all, our project means giving them a space to build a community in which young men can grow together, learn together, and advance together. The reception we have received has been nothing short of remarkable; I have kids knocking on my door wanting to get involved. I've had gang members sliding into my direct messages on Instagram. The word has gotten out.

The young people I meet want something better than what they see around them. The crime rate is, fortunately, falling nationally since a spike during the pandemic.⁸ But it clearly remains unacceptably high in communities like mine.⁹

Albany has a crime rate of about twelve per 1,000 residents,¹⁰ putting us at just about the average for cities and towns across America.¹¹ Between 2010 and 2019 juvenile crime rates declined by 58%.¹² In fact, the total percentage of the prison population that is made up of juveniles has declined from .2% in 2002 to 0.02% in 2021—strong progress, but still

⁸ See, e.g., Karen Zamora, Ari Shapiro, & Courtney Dorning, *Violent Crime Is Dropping Fast in the U.S.—Even if Americans Don't Believe It*, NPR RADIO (Feb. 12, 2024, 5:01 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/12/1229891045/police-crime-baltimore-san-francisco-minneapolis-murder-statistics>.

⁹ See, e.g., Samuel Stebbins, *Albany, Georgia is Among the Most Dangerous US Metro Areas*, THE CTR. SQUARE (Nov. 9, 2021), https://www.thecentersquare.com/georgia/albany-ga-is-among-the-most-dangerous-us-metro-areas/article_cf831368-f56e-54a6-9847-583afbe9c9c3.html (“Following a near nation-leading 40.5% surge in violent crime in 2020, the Albany metro area stands alone as by far the most dangerous city in Georgia.”); *Crime in Albany, Georgia*, CRIMEDATA.IO, <https://crimedata.io/georgia/albany> (last visited Apr. 5, 2024) (explaining that, between 2012 and 2022, Albany, Georgia, had a violent crime rate 212.13% higher than the Georgia average and 192.19% higher than the U.S. average).

¹⁰ *Albany, GA Crime Analytics*, NEIGHBORHOOD SCOUT, <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/ga/albany/crime#:~:text=Albany%2C%20GA%20crime%20analytics&text=Albany%20has%20an%20overall%20crime,Albany%20is%201%20in%2085> (last visited Apr. 5, 2024).

¹¹ See *id.* (explaining how Albany's crime rate makes the city safer than 42% of U.S. cities).

¹² CHARLES PUZZANCHERA ET AL., YOUTH AND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM: 2022 NATIONAL REPORT, NAT'L CTR. JUV. JUST. 110 (2022), <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/2022-national-report.pdf>.

unacceptably high.¹³ It is alarming to note that Black males as young as eleven years old are often identified as criminal offenders.¹⁴

My heart breaks when I see it happen. It breaks for that waste of potential. To combat this issue, the “X” for Boys focuses on offering alternative outlets and positive influences for young men. By promoting diverse interests, we aim to steer them away from negative influences and create pathways to potential scholarship opportunities. Our workshops on automotive repair, home improvement, and culinary arts not only equip young men with practical skills but also provide positive role models.¹⁵ By instilling a sense of purpose and self-worth, we hope to break the cycle of incarceration and guide these young individuals towards a more promising future.

Young men are bundles of energy and they need somewhere to put that energy. It can be productive or it can be a source of destruction. If idle hands are the Devil’s plaything, we owe it to our communities to keep their hands busy and occupied.

That’s why our workshops teach men critical automotive skills from brake repair to changing oil.¹⁶ No mother of any of our students should ever have to pay for an oil change ever again. I have the boys changing their moms’ oil now. This gives some repetition and a chance for the entire group to change the oil on different types of cars. Of course we’re still using Mobil 1 oil and filter!

We also offer workshops focused on everything from replacing lighting fixtures and toilets to painting. In short, we offer a pathway to dignity through work. A pathway to opportunity. A pathway to make something of one’s precious life.

We have learned a lot over the course of our work with the young men in our community. I don’t think there are any silver bullets or simple answers

¹³ Zhen Zeng et al., *Juveniles Incarcerated in U.S. Adult Jails and Prisons, 2002–2021*, June NCJ 306140, 1 (2023), <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/jiusajp0221.pdf>.

¹⁴ *About Us*, THE “X” FOR BOYS, <https://thexforboys.org/about-us> (last visited Apr. 6, 2024).

¹⁵ See generally King Randall, I., *The “X” for Boys*, YOUTUBE (Aug. 14, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6bPrv6GG4g&t>.

¹⁶ *Id.*

to these challenges. But let me offer three key suggestions for what we need to focus on a society to ensure we maximize opportunity for our kids.

II. STEPPING UP AS FATHERS

We clearly need the presence of young role models—and that begins with fathers who are loving, fully present, and fully engaged. Across America we have just over 18 million kids growing up without a father in the house—about one in four U.S. children.¹⁷ This is where we see the limits of what public policy can do, in my opinion. This is an area where we need far more personal responsibility and involvement.

But that said, there is a lot we can do as a society to make parenting more affordable—and live up to our pledge to be a nation that puts family first. That includes investing in quality education and building a way of funding our education system in which the quality of our schools doesn't depend on the zip code you happen to grow up in.

And that includes investing in quality pre-K, childcare, and parental leave—allowing parents to build relationships with their kids without dumping an avalanche of costs on them that few other industrialized countries would tolerate.

And finally, I believe there is a responsibility for the rest of us to do our part and step up as mentors when kids are in need of someone in their life to take an interest in them. The outstanding national organization 100 Black Men of America has a motto that resonates with me deeply: “What They See Is What They’ll Be.”¹⁸ In short, if you don't see pilots, doctors, or entrepreneurs who look like you and who come from where you come from, it's very unlikely you'll aspire to those roles. Young men need mentors. They need role models. They need someone modeling a path forward.

¹⁷ Jack Brewer, *Issue Brief: Fatherlessness and its Effects on American Society*, AM. FIRST POL'Y INST. (May 15, 2023), <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/issue-brief-fatherlessness-and-its-effects-on-american-society#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways,are%20led%20by%20single%20mothers>.

¹⁸ *Who We Are*, 100 BLACK MEN OF AM., INC., <https://100blackmen.org/who-we-are/> (last visited Apr. 8, 2024).

If you want to tackle virtually any problem in society, I think it almost always comes back to mentoring. Look at the drug situation and how it is destroying our communities. Yes, we must teach our children that it's popular to "Just Say No."¹⁹ But that doesn't add up to much unless you have a trusted relationship with that child.

When you mentor, you demonstrate that you aren't just popping up once—you're there for the long haul; you're there for them to call and lean on for guidance when they're facing an issue. Many of you are active mentors already. And if you're not, I highly encourage you to find time to give it a shot. Even if it's only a few hours, even if it's virtual.

III. DISCONNECTING FROM BIG TECH

At the "X" for Boys, we recognize the importance of a supportive community. By providing mentorship, educational opportunities, and skill development, we strive to fill the void for young men who may lack consistent guidance at home. Our goal is to empower these individuals to overcome challenges and succeed despite the circumstances they may face. One of the single biggest obstacles—the cloud of technology and social media—is enveloping them at all times. Of course, young people need to know how to navigate technology to forge a career in the twenty-first century.

In fact, many young people have become tech-savvy enough to invent entire new industries and ways of earning a living outside of the old model of a nine-to-five role. We are seeing incredible innovation and creativity in how young people are able to use a phone and a Wi-Fi connection to create art, form connections, and generate enormous value. But there is certainly a cost to this "always on" connectivity.

You can't look at the massive drops in literacy over the past decades and not see a direct line between the decline in reading and the rise of the smartphone. One of the number one things we can do, whether as parents, teachers or mentors, is to do everything we can to keep screen time to a limited chunk of time, however we can. One of the biggest regrets many parents say they have is bowing to the pressure to get their kids a phone too

¹⁹ See Nancy Reagan, "Just Say No.," 3 SCH. SAFETY 4, 4–5 (1986).

early. It immediately cuts back their reading time significantly. Simply put, these phones in our pockets are toxic. Let's put them down.

IV. GETTING BACK TO THE BASICS—READING AND WRITING

And finally—but not unrelated—let's start with the foundation of a successful future: literacy. The ability to read and comprehend is a fundamental skill that opens doors to knowledge, opportunities, and personal growth. Unfortunately, youth literacy rates are a cause for concern in many communities, including, as we have touched on, in my hometown of Albany.²⁰ Solving this problem—again—will require personal responsibility and cultivating a love of reading. But it also will require societal investments—in our libraries, in our schools, and in closing the significant gaps in educational resources and support for our young people.

V. CONCLUSION

The issues we face in Albany, Georgia, and across the nation require a multifaceted approach. The “X” for Boys is committed to playing its part by empowering young men with the skills, knowledge, and support they need to overcome obstacles and succeed in life.

We have a long way to still go from the disruptions of the pandemic when so many of our kids fell behind. A recent study of global learning standards found that performance in critical areas like math and reading was down sharply from before the pandemic; test scores fell by ten points over the last three years, and fifteen points in mathematics.²¹

What can be done? There's no magic bullet, but I come back to the impact of truly investing in high-quality education and making sure kids have someone who is an active presence in their lives and taking an active interest in their education. We know there are so many factors that influence a young person's perspective and view of themselves. We can't

²⁰ *Our Team*, THE “X” FOR BOYS <https://thexforboys.org/our-team> (last visited Apr. 7, 2024); *see* THE “X” FOR BOYS <https://thexforboys.org> (last visited Apr. 7, 2024).

²¹ Collin Binkley, *Education in US and Around the World Suffered Historic Setbacks Due to COVID Pandemic*, USA TODAY (Dec. 5, 2023, 8:57 AM) <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2023/12/05/pisa-scores-show-student-declines-math-reading-science/71809186007/>.

shield them from the world or the media. We can't be everywhere. But when we are fully present in their lives, when we are there as someone they can look up to and emulate, we can model a path forward for a productive, healthy, and satisfying journey through life.

As a society, we must come together to invest in our youth, address systemic challenges, and create an environment where every young person has the opportunity to thrive. Thank you for your time, your support, and your commitment to the future of our youth. Together, let us make a lasting impact and build a better tomorrow for the generations to come.