**Tales of a Bleeding-Heart Liberal – Tourniquet Applied**

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Kit Kat Essay

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Ray Stone *(note: for purposes of this essay and to protect privacy, I am using different names for the subject, his family, and friends)* was born January 7, 1994, in Mt. Carmel West hospital. He was the 4th child born to Sally Stone. She never married but gave birth to 6 children by 4 fathers in random order: Ray had one biological brother - child #6. All were born without health care coverage, and per Ray’s grandmother, all were born with crack cocaine in their system. Child #1 was murdered as a young adult; all other children are alive. At age 5, according to Ray, his grandmother took formal custody of him. She wanted to raise another child and already had custody of his sister. Franklin County Children Services told me a different story: Ray was permanently banned from being in the custody of his mom because of an “incident” that could not be disclosed.

The number of grandparents who serve as primary care givers doubled between 1970 and 1997 with virtually all the increases concentrated in poor and minority families.

Ray’s household consisted of his grandmother, Addie; sister, Nicki; “grandfather,” who in reality was the grandmother’s boyfriend; and, three younger cousins whose mother – Ray’s aunt – was serving time in prison for drugs and prostitution.

The house, located in the Hilltop neighborhood of Columbus, contained worn-out sofas and chairs, the biggest TV screen made at the time, two non-working stereo speakers the size of small refrigerators, a clean kitchen with a vat of grease for deep-frying most foods, and a refrigerator with few contents. The house was small, cigarette smoke wafted in the air, and loud noises were constant – from TV, arguments, and screaming children. There was no “quiet” space.

Ray’s grandmother, Addie, worked as a cleaning lady at budget motels. She received no benefits and paid into social security. She moved the family periodically because she either fell behind in her rent and/or the house would become inhabitable due to lack of maintenance by the landlord. She always moved within a few blocks of her previous residence on the Hilltop. Poverty was a way of life.

Ray’s sister, Nicki, was smart, personable, and selected as homecoming queen in high school. She knew how to work the system and stay one-step ahead of trouble: giving false names and addresses to obtain cell phones; somehow avoiding utility cut offs; and, learning from her grandmother that the little cousins had to be attended by someone in the house, otherwise government funding could be cut.

Ray’s mom, Sally, was an infrequent part of his life. He could not count on her because of her drug abuse. His father, who lived out of state, would only occasionally communicate with Ray, and often when they did plan to get together, his father would not show up.

The three younger cousins living in the house were not allowed to play outside unless an adult was present. The dangers of roaming pit bulls, shootings, and random acts of violence on the street were real, and thus the cousins were often confined to the house’s interior.

This is a neighborhood that is literally two miles from where we dine tonight, yet figuratively 2 million miles from our own reality.

Ray and I came into each other’s lives in February 2003, when he was 9 years old and in the 6th grade.

My essay tonight is a story of Ray’s life, its intersection with my life, my values and my experiences, and the extrapolated context of this relationship to the future of our city and state.

My connection with Ray occurred through the Hilltop Lutheran Church where one of my best friends, Tom, was mentoring Ray’s best friend, Duane.

Like most churches in the Hilltop, especially mainstream Protestant Churches, Hilltop Lutheran Church was struggling – in attendance, finances, and spirit. The Upper Arlington Lutheran Church had “adopted” the Hilltop church by providing resources such as volunteers, clothing, and food drives, as well as a church organist and a youth leader. It’s an excellent model of more purposeful engagement and impactful resource allocations because it built personal relationships, shared experiences, and valued connections between the two church’s congregations.

My friend Tom and his wife, who were members of the Upper Arlington church, tutored Duane through an Ohio Reads program and engaged him in Sunday Youth Fellowship. Tom became an active and frequent mentor to Duane, and Ray would often accompany them.

One day Tom suggested that I consider mentoring Ray, because he couldn’t handle both, and that this would give Tom and me the opportunity to do things with each other as well as with Ray and Duane. I agreed. The church’s youth minister first contacted Ray’s grandmother to confirm her approval for his mentoring, which she agreed, and then I called to seek her permission. Her response was simply “ok.”

This was not an organized mentoring program such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. Rather, it was simply Tom and I hanging out with Duane and Ray, which always included filling their hungry bellies with food.

The Hilltop. At one time, the Hilltop was one of the best-known and most close-knit working-class neighborhoods in Columbus. It boosted a vibrant retail scene on W. Broad Street, numerous churches and civic organizations, a stable and affordable housing market, wonderful parks, a high school that was a source of community pride, and many factories and light industrial companies that provided a steady stream of quality jobs and middle-class incomes. Companies such as Delco and Fisher Body formed an employment anchor that provided economic vibrancy and stability. As westward expansion occurred, the Hilltop area also claimed one of the Casto Company’s first shopping centers – Great Western - with its display of the 8 Wonders of the World; and later Westland Mall. Even further west on West Broad Street was the high-end Lincoln Village resort. The Hilltop even produced a Columbus Mayor, M.E. Sensenbrenner. It was a great community.

No more. With factories closing and residents moving into suburbia, the Hilltop deteriorated significantly. Here are some startling statistics: for the past two years, it has had the city’s highest homicide rate and a violent crime rate nearly 50% higher than the rest of Columbus; had the city’s highest number of heroin overdoses; 3rd lowest life expectancy rate in Ohio; 33% of the residents live below poverty level; 37% of the population has not completed high school; medium family income is $37,000 with per capita income at $17,000. The average household size is 6. It’s also home of the famous tattoo parlor that brought down Jim Tressell, former OSU football coach. It’s a neighborhood where poverty more than race is the common denominator.

Despite determined activists and city and state investment, the Hilltop area struggles mightily. In some areas, it increasingly has become the neighborhood of last resort.

A walk down the street Ray resided provides a visual history as well as present-day composite of the problem: one house is vacant with windows boarded, the next has iron bars on its doors and windows, followed by a house occupied by a proud homeowner with a tidy yard and flowers, sitting next to a home with a slot in the door indicating a crack house. Last year a person walking on this street was shot and killed. Drugs and prostitution are on open display. It’s scary, it’s sad, it’s a Columbus neighborhood far past its glory days with minimal hope for a future.

At Duane’s nearby home, a drive-by shooting occurred while kids were on the front porch. The former boyfriend of Duane’s mom had just been released from prison and stopped to visit her. Former prison gang members were after him, followed him to the house, and then shot at him from the street. A bullet hit Duane’s sister in the leg. A block over from Ray’s house, a man knocked on his neighbor’s door and when the door opened, he shot and killed the neighbor and his wife. On Ray’s residential street an adult man was staying in the basement of a house to have sex with the teenager living there while the grandparents claimed they weren’t aware of his presence.

Robert Putman, in his book Our Kids (he also was author of Bowling Alone), states that “material deprivation, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, exposure to environmental risks can have powerful, long-term effects in children’s intellectual and emotional development.” That describes the Hilltop and the children living there.

Initially, the four of us – Tom, Duane, Ray, and I – hung out together; examples included going to the circus, Harlem Globetrotters, and sporting events, and engaging in outdoor activities. In a few months, Ray and I started getting together without Tom and Duane. The first time we went out together alone became a stark example of what the Hilltop had become. After dinner at a fast-food restaurant, Ray and I went to a Dairy Queen on Sullivant Ave. While leaning against my car eating ice cream, we noticed a lady with two kids in her car circling the parking lot who then stopped in front of us. Ray didn’t know her. I thought she was asking for directions. She stared at me, then stared at Ray and asked him in a stern voice, “Do your parents know that you are with him (meaning me)?” Ray replied that his grandmother knew. She again stared at me suspiciously and asked if I had permission from his grandmother to be with him. I then realized she was accusing me of being a pedophile. And why not? I was an older white guy with a nice car, not dressed for that neighborhood, taking a young kid out for ice cream. Welcome to the world of unstructured mentoring. At first, I was angry to be accused of something so horrible, but upon reflection I appreciated that someone was looking out for the kids in this neighborhood. At least somebody cared.

In retrospect, I also believe that his grandmother was initially leery of my intentions. For two years, she never called me by my name. Most days she wouldn’t greet me at door, but simply yelled to Ray, “Your mentor’s here.” She was protective of him, which ultimately, I appreciated.

My goals in mentoring Ray were to: take him places for different exposures and experiences; simply talk with him about anything – sports, school, his family; encourage him to do well in school; ensure he was fed when with me; and, demonstrate stability, consistency, values and - most importantly - reliability.

There are many vignettes to talk about my life with Ray. They weave around school, community, and economics. Here are several that I want to share that follow the sequence of his life.

Ray played in the Pop Warner football league in Franklinton. It was amazing to watch these kids react positively to the strong, male, tough-love presence of the team’s coach. He was a male adult role model that most didn’t have yet needed. At one of the games, after a series of bad calls by the referee, a parent charged onto the field and punched the referee. A melee ensued among the adults, not the kids. I wasn’t clear if knives or guns were involved because I was running for the protection of my car. Soon police helicopters were hovering above, and many police cars were present. The consequence was that kids would no longer be permitted to play future games on that field. At the end of the year, a banquet was held at the Golden Corral restaurant. The league provided trophies and was to pay for the kids’ meals. However, the coach skipped town with the money for the banquet and awards. The kids still ate thanks to people pitching in, and certificates were provided.

Another story……

I arranged for the church youth group to meet with Mayor Coleman in his office and share a pizza. To these kids, Mayor Coleman was the uber-god. They saw him on TV; he was cool and wore “nice threads” (their words). They connected with him and listened to his every word. Mayor Coleman showed them how to look a person in the eye and firmly shake hands, something they never had been shown. They practiced with him. He deputized them as Junior Mayors and administered an oath of office. Ray still remembers this vividly and shakes hands accordingly, as does Duane. The power of an example by the right person is incredible. And these kids truly needed to see positive and successful models.

During this period, I received a call from Ray’s grandmother. It was the first time she ever called, and the first time she ever called me by my name. She sternly stated that she was ready to throw him out of the house if he didn’t straighten up. He was running around with the “wrong crowd,” out late, and had a girlfriend, and “you know what that can lead to.” She asked me to talk to him because he’ll “listen to you.” I felt validated by Addie and confirmed that my time with Ray was having some impact. Clearly, Addie loved her kids and grandchildren, and she was trying to prevent something bad happening to them, to the point that she had to call me. Again, Robert Putnam wrote “Impoverished parents/guardians use preventative strategies aimed at keeping children safe in rough neighborhoods where dangers far outweigh opportunities.” There are no opportunistic or proactive strategies in the Hilltop neighborhood, only preventative ones.

Another story……. Ray had forgotten that he “friended” me on Facebook. I read his posts to keep up with him. At one point, he was writing exceptionally vulgar posts. I wasn’t certain whether these were words from a rapper, from Ray thinking he was a rapper, or simply Ray using his everyday language. When I told him that I had been reading his Facebook posts – Duane said “uh, oh” and Ray looked nervously surprised – I commented that this wasn’t the language he used when speaking to me. “Who was the real Ray?” I asked. He said that the specific post was a rapper’s song, but that he speaks that language when around his friends because that’s how they communicate. He said he didn’t use those words around me, because: a) I wouldn’t understand what he was saying; and, b) using the language would be disrespectful to me.

Here are some stories about Ray and school….

Ray’s grandmother told me that the only time she had been to his school was when he was facing disciplinary actions and she was required to meet with the teacher or principal. Without hesitation, she approved of my attendance at parent/teacher conferences and visiting his school.

My observations of the teachers at Hilltonia Middle School, where he was enrolled, were positive – dedicated professionals, cared for the kids, frustrated with time and preparation needed for the required state testing, and thrilled to have a parent or guardian show up to discuss a student. The problem, as I saw it, was with school administrators generally and guidance counselors specifically. When I checked, the administrators weren’t aware that Ray had missed the maximum number of school days for unexcused absences prior to suspension. They were, however, aware of his math test scores – he scored in the highest percentile - yet they had never explored with him the possibility of advanced classes. Later in the school year, he missed more days but wasn’t suspended. State testing started soon, and I suspected they wanted him in attendance to take the test, score high, and in turn lift the entire school’s academic standing.

During my meeting with the guidance counselor with Ray present, I asked about the possibility of Ray, given his math ability, enrolling in Metro High School, the STEM school jointly sponsored by Battelle and Ohio State. The guidance counselor looked at Ray and said, “You have to be smart to attend that school. You must be able to write complete sentences, and Ray, I’ve seen no evidence that you’re capable of doing this. Why would you consider going to that school?”

He eventually decided to enroll in Metro High School but did so during his sophomore year instead of freshman year, which was a mistake. He was not academically or emotionally equipped to enter as a sophomore, having missed a full year in the accelerated program. He faced difficulty assimilating with a new class that already had been together for a year and struggled with the daily commute of 3 COTA bus transfers and a quarter mile walk.

And then he got into serious trouble at Metro. Ray was playfully fighting with a girl over a tube of Chapstick, and she placed it in her blouse. He immediately reached into her blouse to grab it. The girl’s mother filed a complaint. His action is defined by the school as sexual assault, and sexual assault usually means expulsion. Fortunately, he was placed in the disciplinary program which is a separate school for unruly students and troublemakers.

Ray excelled there. The rigid structure and predictability of the daily routine was more to his liking. He was a model student, regularly receiving gold stars for his performance.

In his junior year, after returning to Briggs High School where he started as a freshman, tragedy struck. His grandmother suffered a massive stroke, never regained consciousness, and died 6 months later. He was devastated. A few days after the funeral, a fight occurred between his visiting uncle and the “grandfather,” gun shots were fired in the house, and his sister immediately moved the kids temporarily into their mom’s house. My wife and I offered to take Ray into our home temporarily or permanently, but he declined: too much change, too much unfamiliarity; he wanted to be with his family and friends in his old neighborhood. His mom’s tiny house also contained three other young siblings. One day in front of all the kids, Ray’s mom told me that she had taken Nicki, his 19-year-old sister, to a lesbian bar, which apparently was a standard practice for the mom, who wasn’t a lesbian. By flirting and dancing with the other women, they were able to obtain free drinks and meals, which was the goal. Her raw and unfiltered description of the bar scene made me uncomfortable. The kids listened intently.

When Ray graduated from Briggs High School, he received recognition for excellent attendance, which didn’t make sense, because he continued to miss many school days. Later, I learned that the assistant principal, whom I had met earlier in the year to discuss Ray’s academic progress and who oversaw the school’s attendance records, had been caught in the Columbus City Schools’ attendance falsification scandal and had resigned.

Ray clearly had the intellectual capacity to attend college. He wanted to be a middle-school math teacher. We visited several colleges, and he selected Shawnee State because some friends had mentioned it. Duane, two other buddies, and Ray’s girlfriend also enrolled – all on student loans. It was like the old neighborhood again. He lived in a university-owned 3-bedroom/2-bath apartment with five others. He had his own bed, heat in the winter, AC in the fall and spring, and plenty of hot water. He was on a meal plan with unlimited food and gained 30 pounds during the first semester. Yet for all this luxury that he had never experienced, he wouldn’t fulfill his part by studying or attending classes. He simply was not willing to make the effort. It was the same pattern I had seen throughout his life. He racked up $15,000 in student loan debt.

He and his friends departed after their freshman year, returned to Columbus, and then enrolled at Columbus State. However, after again making minimal-to-no effort, he essentially flunked out, which – no disrespect to Columbus State – takes effort. In short order, his fiancé, Jane, gave birth to their child – a son named Ray Jr (RJ for short) – and then they married. He worked at a call center which is the new McDonalds for the underemployed. After training, he was quickly promoted and soon thereafter fired because of chronic tardiness or absenteeism. He then took a job at a warehouse, second only to call centers for the underemployed, especially given the plethora of warehouses in the Columbus Region. He did well, was trained on equipment, received a raise to $12.50 per hour but was fired for a safety violation combined with tardiness. He then worked for another warehouse while seeking other jobs; however, his poor employment record thwarted any opportunities.

He did apply to enroll in a computer coding training program. Computer coders are in high demand in Columbus. The 14-week program through a national operation in affiliation with Rev 1 at Ohio State produced a 90% job-placement rate with an average starting salary of $60,000. It presented a perfect opportunity for Ray to utilize his math skills and obtain gainful employment and upward mobility opportunities without requiring a 4-year degree. Acceptance into the program required passage of a math exam – which Ray aced, scoring second highest of the applicants – and a personal interview, which he surprisingly failed. As a result, he wasn’t admitted into the program. The program administrator, who was defensive when I inquired why Ray wasn’t accepted, said that during his interview Ray wasn’t committed to the rigors of the program. The administrator suggested that he apply for a different, less-intense program and directed him to the other program’s website. Based on the photos, it was a program for minority students. Ray was discouraged and didn’t apply.

More recently, while driving through a predominantly white suburban community, he was pulled over by the police. The officer gave no reason for pulling him over. I believe he was profiled. After running a background check, the officer discovered that Ray’s driver’s license had expired, and he had no car insurance. Ray said he forgot to renew. He had to appear in Mayor’s Court, along with 50 other defendants, 2/3 of whom were from minority races, and pay a fine and court costs after proving he had a valid license and insurance. He shrugged his shoulders, life’s a hassle.

These were some samples of Ray, his life, and my observations and interactions with that life. You have a sense of him, his surroundings, and his challenges.

**So, what does it all mean**? What’s my point?

What I’ve learned about Ray is that he’s smart and has a good soul. He’s never lied to me. When determined and focused, he can achieve results. He’s currently employed, supporting his family although at near poverty levels, paying taxes and now votes due to a negative reaction to Trump. He has life-long friends, connects with his family, and is focused on being the father to his son that his father was not to him, although he has no successful model to draw from. He seems generally happy, loves his wife (most of the time), and has more money in his pocket than ever before, which still isn’t much. He has choices in life, although they are limited.

So, what’s the problem? For Ray, the potential problem is long term with a lack of an economic foundation for his future. He doesn’t have the skills, education, training, relationships, and experience to fill the jobs of the future. His family, neighborhood and schools have not provided a model of success or stability from which to build an economically and socially sustainable future.

And the problem is easily extrapolated to Columbus. There are many Ras and Hilltop neighborhoods that are isolated from successful models and experiences and disconnected from economic opportunities. Indeed, despite the growing economy, the situation in these neighborhoods is getting worse with higher drop-out rates, drug use, crime, and other ills.

Why do I care? Because, notwithstanding that he grew up without parents in a dangerous and poor neighborhood, faces discrimination in subtle and ongoing ways, never observed models of success, and faces daily obstacles, he **does** have the **opportunity** to achieve and contribute so much more – for his family and to his community. I care because I want an economic and socially sustainable future for him and for all of Columbus.

Abigail Wexner was recently quoted as stating, “When I think about why it is that we strive to be great - I think it’s in order to do good.” I agree. I want Ray to strive to be great, not only for himself and his family, but to do good for the community… for Columbus. And I want the same for Columbus – to strive to be great to do good. Thus, sayeth the bleeding-heart liberal.

So, if Columbus is so economically vibrant, why aren’t Ray and others like him leveraging the economic opportunities – quite simply, the jobs available - to create upward mobility and a more secure economic future? And why aren’t our institutions doing more to help make those connections that ultimately enhance our economic and social vitality?

It’s not that there haven’t been ongoing efforts to try and solve the problems. Many organizations, government agencies, public/private partnerships, educational institutions, and foundations have worked diligently and poured significant dollars into this issue. Yet, from my observation with the Hilltop generally and Ray specifically, I’m not seeing a real impact; or rather, the positive impacts are being overwhelmed by the negative forces.

And then there’s the added perspective that this situation isn’t a crisis, and crisis is always an instigator for change. It’s not a crisis to Ray; he has a job and money in his pocket. And it’s not a crisis for Columbus; economic growth is occurring with more jobs than ever being created. Yet it is indeed a problem that’s growing exponentially and will eventually become a crisis of workforce economics, a crisis of neighborhood isolation, a crisis for families, a crisis for Columbus. So, for now, even if the situation is not deemed a crisis, then surely it is a missed opportunity for Ray and Columbus to strengthen our city economically and socially for enhanced long-term sustainable success.

So, how do we turn this into an opportunity? Where do we start?

I used to think that solving this problem – creating the opportunity - was simply a matter of a person having a job. I had always subscribed to the Governor Jim Rhodes’ principle that a job solves all problems (although he wasn’t the first to state it, Governor Rhodes was the first person I heard say it). If everyone had a job, then taxes would be paid, families would be strong, schools and communities would advance, and a future could be secured.

While posted job openings in Columbus are prevalent - for example Chase has over 1000 jobs openings (both entry-level and with experience needed); the City of Columbus is aggressively recruiting minority firefighter and police officer candidates; the area hospitals post thousands of job openings - Ray, his friends and many graduates of area high schools are not seeking to fill these positions. Why such a mismatch? Why are so many people not connecting to these jobs and creating economic opportunities and upward mobility for themselves?

For Ray, I’m not exactly clear. It’s not fear of a drug test, but he offers other reasons and excuses: firefighters stay away from home for three days a week; Honda is too far away; the job isn’t something he wants to do, etc. I believe there are other issues at play: fear of success and/or failure; can’t see a long-term future that’s worth the investment; doesn’t have a model for success; doesn’t fully understand and appreciate risk and reward for effort; and, none of his friends and peers are doing it. His measure of success is owning a red corvette. Yet, he doesn’t see the path and doesn’t have the patience to understand what it takes to own a red corvette.

I now understand and appreciate that jobs and economic growth alone won’t solve the problem. According to Dr. Raj Chetty, Harvard economics professor, “Job growth is not sufficient by itself to create **upward mobility**…. It hinges more on other factors than just job creation. Race and neighborhoods are two factors, and neighborhoods from the standpoint of economically unviable, single parent/guardian families where unemployment is prevalent.”

Oren Cass, author of “The Once and Future Worker” who served as a policy advisor to Mitt Romey’s presidential campaign, wrote: “Economic growth and rising materialistic living standards are laudable goals but they by no means guarantee the health of a labor market that meets society’s long-term needs.”

He went on to state, “A labor market in which workers can support strong families and communities is the central determinant of long-term prosperity and should be the focus of public policy.”

And conservative economist, Abby McCloskey, who also served as Jeb Bush’s presidential policy advisor, recently wrote in an article published in *National Affairs* that “economic growth alone – however beneficial and necessary – is unlikely to address some of the biggest challenges that the American economy faces.” She went on to write, “The family a person is born into and the neighborhood he lives in have much stronger influence on his socioeconomic outcome than any other factors.”

So, it’s not just jobs, although that’s the foundational anchor, but also other factors that come into play such as the neighborhoods, race, families, and community relationships*.*

Let’s stay focused on the neighborhood aspect. From my perspective, successful neighborhoods are comprised of viable schools, churches, and civic organizations, and more importantly, the relationships and connectivity gained from the experiences.

To again quote Abby McCloskey, “The ties between us – associations that comprise civic life – have been strained and torn. People are losing their sense of purpose, dignity, and connection to one another…. Helping restore these connections is a precondition for sustaining a healthy and inclusive economy.”

She recommends investing in these relationships, “Our economy will be strong and inclusive if it’s built on a foundation of close ties among families and communities.”

Sociologist Erick Klinenberg emphasizes the importance of “social infrastructure” – physical places like churches and libraries where people gather as important barometers of healthy neighborhoods. For neighborhoods like the Hilltop, the social infrastructure has greatly diminished with fewer churches, civic organizations and in turn more isolation and fewer relationships.

What’s left are the schools, and they are a key – both from an academic standpoint but also from a neighborhood engagement and social fabric perspective.

Obviously, many issues and challenges exist with our schools. I want to cite a specific example that ties into my guidance counselor concerns and applies to all school systems, but especially to schools in communities like the Hilltop. And that is the overemphasis on college as the only path to economic success. Unfortunately, such emphasis has come at the expense of demonstrating the value of a career or technical education. By default, such a career path is viewed as inferior, and the kids enrolled in those programs are looked down upon. This message also is reinforced by the separateness of career and vocational education: separate schools, schedules, social interactions… even separate homecoming courts and valedictorians. The messages about immediate employment, growing incomes, opportunities for employment advancement and upward mobility that are coming from construction trades, technology companies and others are not advancing nor credible to many of the kids, and in my view the schools aren’t helping. Ray’s guidance counselors never actively engaged him in discussions about college or career training. They simply went through the motions.

College isn’t for everyone. Until we demonstrate and emphasize the value of career and vocational education – that it’s a cool thing to do, that you can obtain a job that pays good wages and offers salary advancements, that you can envision an opportunity for upward mobility - then the disconnect between jobs openings in Columbus and the inability of people to fill them will continue.

As the collective issue of neighborhoods, employment and the economy are gaining increased study and attention on a national level, creative ideas and recommendations are emerging. Examples include: non-college pathways in high school that includes internships, subsidized work with employer-sponsored training, and a guaranteed $25,000 saving account upon graduation; issuing Pell Grants for vocational and other training that otherwise are available only to college students; making all charitable contributions tax deductible to provide more resources to neighborhoods; and, entitlement reform that restores a fiscal balance and modernizes benefits for todays’ labor force.

My ideas include: requiring companies receiving tax incentives to provide mentorships to school children; use corporate and foundation financial support to fund student-recognition banquets, ensure financial support to extra-curricular activities, as well as underwrite celebrity appearances to speak to the kids with important messages; and also, leveraging schools, through a collaborative and unified effort to also serve as community gathering places and safe zones where kids can learn life skills, develop healthy relationships, and obtain meals.

All of these - and many more – require transformational change: a recognition of a problem, a long-term commitment to address it, a tremendous amount of resources – financial and otherwise, and holistic collaboration on a scale seldom experienced. Can we do it? My bleeding heart is all in – yes, we can. There’s no choice in my mind.

However, my ever-tightening tourniquet after many years of battered civic-life experiences tells me that transformational change of this magnitude is unlikely to occur. What unfortunately happens is a piecemeal approach with long-term minimal sustainability and impact. David Brooks, *New York Times* columnist aptly described it this way, “… escaping the tyranny of randomized controlled experiments in which one donor funds one program that tries to isolate one leverage point to have “impact.” “

Ok. I get it. But let’s fantasize for a moment and envision that a transformational change has occurred. Would Ray’s life be different? Would he be on a track of upward mobility? Would he be gainfully employed and contributing to his community? Would he then make an effort? Would his definition of success, his aspiration, be something more than a red corvette? My bleeding heart says, “yes, of course”; however, my tourniquet says, “no way.” The truthful answer for me is simply, “I don’t know.”

I’m reminded of the adage “you can draw a horse to water but can’t make him drink.” That’s what I’ve been trying to do with Ray and that’s what Columbus has been trying to do as well – make them drink. I now believe the real question for Ray and Columbus is “Can we make them *thirsty*…. can we motivate them… to understand that the water will quench the thirst, to see the value of the drink, and then to want to drink it? Our community must do more not only to bring them to the water but help them identify their thirst so that they choose to drink from the trough of opportunity.

That, my friends, is a heavy lift.

Let me close with some updates on the persons in my essay:

* Ray’s mom is a doting grandmother to Ray’s son, RJ. She babysits often, and I presume still takes drugs.
* Ray’s sister works at a nightclub, drives a nice car and wears nice clothes.
* Ray’s “grandfather” lives with him and helps to babysit RJ.
* Ray’s friend, Duane, graduated from the University of Toledo with a degree in general studies. He’s unemployed with a heavy student loan debt.
* Ray works as a Columbus City Schools bus driver. He earns $19 per hour. He likes being around the kids, the routine/familiarity of the work, the responsibility of ensuring the safe transporting of the kids. He’s not been tardy or absent.
* He is enrolled at Columbus State to set an example for his son – that he continues to pursue a college degree.
* Ray moved out of the Hilltop due to safety concerns for his son, and now lives on the far south-side of Columbus. He desires to purchase a home and have another baby. His wife has worked 6 consecutive months, which is a record for her.
* RJ is in kindergarten in Columbus City Schools. Ray wants to move into another school district before RJ begins first grade.
* For a Christmas gift, Ray bought his son a book.

As for me, I’ll continue to believe, and my heart will continue to bleed notwithstanding the presence of a tightening tourniquet. My hope for the future will be eternal, yet I’ll be realistic when voting for a school levy that the money won’t be well spent; frustrated that our community’s assets – its people – are not fully connected to opportunity; and, outraged that in our democracy voters don’t pay attention to whom they are electing to the school board.

Throughout all of this – my time with Ray, my experiences in civic engagement, my life in Columbus - I still passionately believe that the bottom line is relationships – exposure to them in varying degrees to learn and to grow……After all, isn’t that what Kit Kat is all about?