

Exclusive Interview With The Authoress Hillary Drummond Simpson

Written by Patricia Turnier

Tuesday, 05 February 2013 02:29



Hillary Drummond Simpson is a mother who experienced the challenges of raising a Black son successfully and has also encountered hundreds of African American boys whose career goals are to become [rappers](#) or ballplayers. These were her main inspiration to write her book.

She is the author of *How To Become A Successful Black Man*. It portrays males from different backgrounds and it showcases diverse role models – including the President, Mr. Barack Obama, the NY Times Bestselling author, Omar Rashad Tyree – for the youth.

Each male presented in the book narrates his path to success while explaining how they overcame the hurdles they encountered. In other words, they provide a road map to achieve lifelong goals. Sequels of the book should be written.

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Successful Black men from ages 21 to 80 spanning many generations are represented (in the book) all of them are testimony to the power of education.

The book gives a wide range of Black men succeeding in different realms. The patriarch was the author's father who passed away during the writing of *How To Become A Successful Black Man*.

The book raises questions of substance (with adequate answers) such as:

How do you raise successful Black men?

Is it nature or nurture?

Are most successful Black men academically gifted?

How can you change his self-perception if he can't envision it himself?

How can a single mom raise a son successfully?

Mrs. Simpson is an educator who has taught in three different states over the past 20 years. She has gained an inside look at the culture of classrooms across the U.S. Throughout her teaching career, she has observed a startling, yet recurring problem: African-American boys, influenced by the popular role models in our society, are considering careers primarily in entertainment and/or sports. Thus, Mrs. Simpson's own son dreamed of being a rapper, inspired by the Black icons of American pop culture.

To challenge this perception, Simpson founded The Boys to Men group in 2004, a mentor program that pairs Black boys with male role models in the Black community. Simpson is also passionate about spreading awareness of the difficulties young males face today, including systemic discrimination, institutional racism, the shocking statistics regarding education, the penal system² (Black men have higher incarceration rates than any other group, according to the Bureau of Justice. Moreover, one in three Black men between the ages 20 and 29 years-old is under correctional supervision or control) among other issues. The current statistics are staggering, Black male unemployment is at 40% while Black unemployment in general is at 16%. The academic drop-out rate definitely has an impact on the unemployment rate. Consequently, this situation affects our families.

Hillary Simpson was the founder and CEO of Drummond Communications, a Public Relations

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firm from 1986 until 1989. This educator is a former TV host and executive producer of her own talk show, Viewpoint with Hillary, which ran from 2003 till 2006 on EBTV cable show broadcasted in East Brunswick, New Jersey. She founded and presided over African-American Cultural Association in East Brunswick, NJ from 1997 until 2000. Aforementioned, Simpson created The Boys to Men Group in 2004, a mentor program that pairs Black boys with male role models.

Simpson attended New York University and obtained a Bachelor of Science degree with a double major in marketing and management in 1985. She later got her Master's in elementary education from Adelphi University in New York in 1993, her Master's in administration and supervision from Kean University in New Jersey in 2006. Simpson currently resides in Conyers, Georgia, with her family. She is a 5th grade math/science teacher at Sims Elementary School.

Overall, Simpson has embraced the mission to promote other career options for young Black men, besides a future as a rapper or ballplayer. The authoress believes that the real role models for today's Black youth should be the leaders, businessmen, teachers and scientists of our society.

Here, Mrs. Simpson shares her thoughts regarding the state of Black youth mainly in relation to her book. We spoke to her last fall.

P.T. There is an educational gender gap (especially in literacy: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:>) in America. Some males even think that reading is a feminine activity. As an educator where do you think this perception comes from? In the past decades, men knew that successful males read. What happened since then?

H.S. My book talks about the disparities between genders and ethnicities in education, among other themes. Research also shows a significant achievement gap between Black and White boys, and Black boys fall far below Black girls in college graduation rates.

In How To Become A Successful Black Man, the readers will find specific statistics regarding these issues:

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- According to the National Center for Education Statistics 2000, "Boys in elementary through high school score significantly lower than girls on standardized measures of reading, and they are 5 times more likely to undergo learning or disabilities placement." In 2008, the statistics were no better.

- Boys are 30 percent more likely than girls to flunk or drop out of school. When it comes to grades and homework, girls outperform boys in elementary, high school, college, and even graduate school.

- Women outnumber men in higher education with 56 percent of bachelor's degrees and 55 percent of graduate degrees going to women.

- Forty percent of African-American women between the ages of 18 and 24 attended college compared to only 25 percent of the men in that age group. So if we start with one hundred men, twenty-five will attend college and only eight will end up graduating in six years. This represents a loss of over 90 percent of our men!

- According to Jawanza Kunjufu, famed writer of African-American books, "African Americans are the only group in America in which females outnumber males (800,000 to 500,000) in college enrolment. These statistics are alarming and there is a crisis.

We are living in a different era where we are surrounded with technology: smartphones, ipads, computers, TVs and so on. The question we can raise is: What kind of information are we learning from this advance in technology? Do we have the ability to discern diverse information with a critical perspective? Smartphones won't necessarily make people smarter. The male role models presented to the Black male youth in America is very narrow and mostly related to entertainment. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is a minority who makes big bucks in this industry. The society does not present them wider options of what they can do with their lives. In fact, kids from all origins are in awe of the entertainment business and sports.

I believe that young Black males observe more people from their race doing physical activities and succeeding in sports so they can relate. In other words, they become role models that

Black males try to imitate. Seventy percent of Black children are growing up in single parent households, the majority without a father. Therefore, Black boys do not see a male figure read the newspaper, help his child with homework or show tenderness to his children. Kids emulate what they observe. So, to reverse the situation, other males need to step in: uncles, grandfathers and so on to encourage these kids to take the right path and make them realise that education has nothing to do with gender. It has everything to do with personal growth and access to more freedom. To conclude, parents and/or other family members have to read to their children. If the kids don't perceive a real love for education in their parents, this negative leaning will be transmitted to them.

P.T. Some people think that boys (whatever their nationality) achieve less academically because they are not exposed to many male teachers in elementary schools and so on. Many Black boys don't have teachers who look like them, and they don't necessarily identify with their educators. Do you think that it is one of the reasons why it is difficult for them to thrive? If so, what can be done to correct this problem?

H.S. It is absolutely one of the main reasons they don't strive. The reasons behind this crisis are many, but overwhelmingly our Black boys are growing up without positive male role models. We need to see it to be it. If I don't see that I can become a teacher, a physician or a lawyer, I won't aim for these goals because I won't believe that I can achieve it. Most of the time, boys see female Caucasian teachers. It will never happen that Black boys will become White females when they grow up nor will ever also become a Black woman. So, the role models are not there for them to observe on a daily basis. They need to see more of themselves in the classroom.

In middle and high school, there are a few more male teachers. In my school, our staff is composed by 35 teachers and we have only about 4 males. The boys love them because they identify with them. One of the male teachers loves the pink color. All of a sudden, we started to hear the boys say they also like this color [laughs]. They realise that it is not necessarily a female color. They need these role models.

The male professors in high schools need to be recruited for elementary school to counterbalance the teaching staff. We also have to expose the kids to mentors who will guide the boys on the career of their choice.

Moreover, many boys need discipline and rigor to thrive. They have to be focused and determined to accomplish the goals they set for themselves. Organisation is also very

important. In other words, structure is a requirement. Many young males enrolled into college to play sports. Often, they are not organised enough to find the right balance between their academic duties and their athletics' demands which put at stake their college subscription and/or scholarship. Some are also ill prepared to go to college. This should not happen and the kids from their early years need to have the right supervision in reading, writing, arithmetic and so on to help them acquire a strong academic foundation. Discipline and rigor have to be taught to them. The school system needs to have higher expectations of them likewise young males for themselves. This also includes all the people who are part of their lives: the parents, the extended family, etc. The male youth needs to realise that nothing comes easy. You cannot decide to reach a certain goal that you aspire without making the effort and sacrifice required to attain the objectives.

P.T. To be on top in any field, a minimum of 10, 000 hours of work are required.

H.S. This is a very interesting point! This means that when you embrace a career you better truly love it to be really committed, motivated and determined. Overall, as mentioned, Black boys need to be exposed more to role models and their fathers have to be involved in their lives. Black mothers cannot do it alone whatever their income. They cannot be the mothers and the fathers. The boys will look for male role models and will find them elsewhere if they are not involved in their lives. Unfortunately, it might be in the wrong place, such as in the streets. As much as they love their mothers, they won't emulate a female, trust me [laughs]. They will find a male role model anywhere. If they see, for instance, men not taking care of children, they will think it is normal. So, the right ones need to be involved in their lives because the boys will imitate what they do and not what they are saying. This distinction and nuance are imperative!

P.T. America's universities grant more than 12 000 PhDs per year. To find 2000 Blacks with doctorates per year, one would have to count all the way back to 1920, a time when it was much more difficult for African-Americans to be educated. In 1993, 951 African-Americans earned doctorates at U.S. universities. It is only more recently in 2008, that the number of Black doctorates reached an all-time high of 2,030. As a teacher how do you explain this phenomenon?

H.S. This is a loaded question. It concerns a 100 year period and with my assessment I believe we have regressed in terms of the emphasis we place on education in our society. If you look back to 1920, we were still experiencing the repercussions of slavery in America. Back then, it was more about survival and people wanted to become somebody, not to be trapped in the indentured system of sharecropping for instance. The only way to escape poverty at the time was through education, by becoming a teacher for example. Time progressed and now we want

money and fame or status fast [chuckles].

People need to think seriously about their God-given talent and focus on that instead of following in the path of celebrities, not for the love of acting or singing but to be simply famous. Usually, when the individual is not truly passionate and/or talented, his/her success will be ephemeral. In addition, it is a minority of people who become highly successful and have the privilege of longevity in the entertainment business. The road will be harder if you do not have the right connections or social network in this field.

The decrease in PhDs that you brought up can be partially explained by the rise of tuition and budget cuts, which put more and more students out of the education system. This lack of funding must be reversed. In addition, Black youth have the responsibility to understand that without a strong education poverty will be awaiting for them or they might end up in the penal system. We are not in a post-racial society, despite the fact that we have some of our people in high positions.

P. T. Many kids think they can become superstars in athletics, or other realms like entertainment, without an education. For instance, very few are aware that 70% of former top football players are bankrupt (for many reasons: lack of financial literacy, etc.) or unemployed. We live in a world where physicians, lawyers, teachers and so on earn much less than top entertainers and elite athletes. Does our society truly send the message that diplomas are valued? Do you believe that we live in a society which sends the wrong message to the youth in terms of education? In addition, do you think that with the multitude of TV Reality Shows which showcase instant success, mislead and misinform the youth by making them believe they can make it fast in this world with shortcuts?

H.S. Absolutely! We do send the wrong message. Television Reality Shows mislead and misinform the youth by sending the message that if they live a crazy life, someone will pick them up to have their own shows and become famous [laughs out loud]. They don't tell the youth the real deal. That is why in my book, *How to Become a Successful Black Man* the truth is exposed through my own voice and that of successful Black men. Among them, there is one, Julani Ghana, who is the manager of top sports players. I wanted to get from him the real picture. In addition, he gives advice to parents in terms of what needs to be done to get the right perspectives on sports. He shares the pitfalls and provides recommendations in this realm. He talks about the duration of an athlete's career (which is short compared to many other professions) and what happens to them after, most of the time. Overall, he exposes the pros and cons in this domain. He explains the different levels: being an amateur, a professional, etc.

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Ghana gives a clear picture to parents before they decide if they should support and/or encourage their kids to take this road.

I have lived in two regions of the US, the North East and South East. I noticed that the South is much more sports oriented. It can be a good thing or a bad thing. I believe that the real foundation for our youth is academic. They can always play, but they must not neglect the academic part. They have to remember that sports may be risky. All kind of things might happen with time, for instance, injuries. Furthermore, as mentioned, even if they don't have accidents their athletic life will be short and they will end up with an early retirement so they definitely need a plan B. Boys have the tendency to be more physically active than girls, but we should not encourage them to focus solely on that.

There is a crisis. On average, 58 percent of Black boys do not graduate from high school, and an even smaller number graduate from college. There are cities in the U.S. such as Detroit where the high school graduating rate for Black males is circa 15%. In NY city the graduating rate is almost 30%. In this regard, Black America is facing a national crisis³. The society is failing them and this situation must change.

Parents, educators and the society need to put the emphasis where it needs to be. Education definitely has to be celebrated and it is everybody's responsibility to encourage it. Adults must send the right message to the kids.

To summarize, the youth see people who have Master's and PhDs who are assessing if they are in control of their profession or if they still have to answer to somebody. So, for too many young people, this road is not attractive. They are drawn to instant success with all the glamour in the entertainment business or in sports. The emphasis is totally in the wrong place. They don't go deeper than that. Many ignore that several athletes become broke when their career is over because they were not educated in the first place; they did not have the tools to choose the right accountants and so on, or they were not apprised to make wise investments. The youth need to understand that education is the basis of everything to strive for in life.

We live in a culture which tells kids they can make it easily in the entertainment business or in sports, and that they will be approached for lucrative shoe deals for example. The society paints a pretty rosy picture and the reality could not be further from the truth. More and more, record companies will sign independent artists who have sold a minimum of 30 000 CDs. The youth also regularly ignore for instance that, oftentimes in the music industry, labels will give big

advances to newcomers and they will have to pay it back which will only be possible if the album sells many copies. It is only after that you start to receive royalties. In addition, when you go on tours (an important income for artists), you have to give circa 20 percent to the manager, 10 percent to the booking agent, etc. So, the reality is, nobody can enter this business or other fields with blindfolds and they need to be educated which will allow them to make judicious decisions.

P.T. In your book, you shared with the readers that your son didn't want to see a health professional -- like many other people in the African-American community -- if it is required. Many of their problems are external to them and they have little control over them: systemic discrimination, etc. Do you think in the Black community, asking for help (a life coach, for instance) can be seen as a sign of weakness?

H.S. Absolutely! If you suggest to someone in the community to see a therapist, you will often hear that it is for crazy people, or you don't talk to strangers about personal problems. It can even be seen as a betrayal to talk about family issues and so on outside this immediate circle. I read studies which stated that another obstacle to seeking for help is the fact that several mental health professionals are Caucasian and this creates a cultural barrier for many of them. They feel that they don't know about their struggles and do not want to take the risks to be judged or misunderstood. So, again Black men for instance will look for role models in that field too, and will find a scarcity. They won't take the risk to make themselves appear vulnerable to a stranger who they assume won't relate to their issues, so they won't ask for help. They will take another direction by trying to figure out their problems by themselves, or with people from their surroundings who cannot be objective and/or are not professionally qualified.

P.T. I think it was very important to profile in your book prominent people. Do you think the fact that we hear so much negativity about the Black community can become a handicap for many to not strive? What needs to be done to expose more Black youth to positive role models in different domains?

H.S. We definitely hear too much negativity. In this regard, I profiled in my book successful Black men such as the young millionaire entrepreneur Hezekiah Griggs III who did not stay in school very long. However, he remained self-taught. He knew at a very young age what he wanted out of life. He was focused, very grounded, self-disciplined to achieve his goals. He began his first business at age 7: he sold tapes of church sermons. When he was 14, he created Justice Inc. which focuses on economic, political and social issues. I believe that society must showcase and reward young entrepreneurs like Griggs III instead of focusing on TV reality shows which have no substance. The public has power on the ratings and needs to

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send a strong message on what they want to see on TV. As long as we aren't clear that we want challenging, educational and engaging topics on television, the status quo will remain.



New York Times Best-Selling Author and Speaker: Omar Rashad Tyree

P.T. How long did it take you to complete your book? In addition, how has your book been received so far by the public, especially young Black males?

H.S. It took me three years to write the book (while working and going to school). First of all, it took me time to gather the men I wanted to talk to for the book that I self-published.

Many Black male readers love the beginning of my book because I talk about my son and they identify with that. They also enjoyed the fact that the men in the book narrate how they grew up. They see that someone who had the same problems they did was able to overcome these hurdles and strived. The male readers enjoyed the fact that these men provided advice to the youth and the parents. This was important to them. They felt that the book was speaking to them and helping them. So, overall, I am getting great responses. I receive calls from people who read my book during their vacation and loved it. The public sees How To Become A Successful Black Man as a guidebook for raising and becoming accomplished Black males in today's world.

P.T. Dr. Sampson Davis, a physician, Dr. George Jenkins, a dentist, and Dr. Rameck Hunt, a physician, all made a pact very early in their young lives that they would support each other to achieve their dreams. Do you think that the formula adopted by these well-known African-American males, called the Three Doctors, could be helpful if it is applied on a large scale among Black males in America?

H.S. These men are three doctors who wrote books which are on the NY Times best-sellers list. They grew up in Newark, NJ, and I taught there. It is a high crime area. The main message that they are sending is if we grew up there and we made it, you can. Peer pressure is powerful among young people whether it is positive or negative. The three doctors you named made a pact at an early age that they would hold each other accountable for reaching their goals. They showed that it is possible to create positive peer pressure in a difficult environment with a true lifelong term commitments and high expectations. They are doing a fantastic job by sending a strong message that education is fashionable and cool. I definitely agree that positive peer pressure can be used to strive.

Overwhelmingly, our Black boys are growing up without positive male role models, so they definitely need to find a support system and I think the formula of the three doctors is really an interesting model to emulate.

P.T. You formed The Boys to Men Group in 2004, a mentor program that pairs Black boys with male role models in the Black community. Share with us its mission and a success story from this group.

H.S. The mission is to connect boys with the male role models in an intellectual setting to enhance them academically, physically and mentally. This idea came to fruition when I was conducting a teacher's book club in Newark. There was a book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap by Alfred Tatum. This book made me realise even more all the challenges that Black boys face with all their insecurities. This is how I noticed the importance of creating an educational setting where they could bond with older males. Many do not know how to push them in the right direction.

With time, we observed that the formula of our men's group worked wonderfully. A great story that I can share as a testimony is about a young man in Newark who did not have a relationship with his father. With the boy's authorisation I invited his father to one of our meetings. He shared with me that the mother never invited him to participate in the educational aspect of his son's life. Now, this father looks forward to the monthly meetings with his son. The boy has more respect for his dad, because even if he is not working he appreciates the fact that he takes more interest in him and realised that his father wants the best for him. His grades improved significantly. Spending time and bonding with his dad brought a lot into this young male's life. We started to work with the boy since he was in fourth grade and now he is in high school. The mother did put aside the father because he did not have a job and was seen as

irresponsible. However, mothers need to realise that it is not because a man does not work that he does not love his children or is unfit to be a father. They should not be cut out of their lives. The sons do not want to be like their mothers and will never be their mothers. Furthermore, a mother cannot replace the father. So, I want to send the message to the fathers, you have to be in your children's lives. They need you. Hug them, let them know you love them and you care about them. Tell them you are proud of them because if you don't somebody else will and it might be the wrong person. When young males are in gangs most of the time, unconsciously, they are looking for role male models, but it is in the wrong place. Young males also need to learn that smart men read and are capable of showing love. Whether you have the money or not, the fathers have to be in their children's lives and this cannot wait.

To conclude, the Boys to Men group is a mentor program that pairs Black boys with male role models. Home Depot sponsored one of our events. All of this really helps. The mission of the program is to improve young men's mental, emotional, and physical state through connecting with the older men in their lives. Rather than bonding through a sporting event or recreational outing, the boys are able to connect with adult role models in an educational setting. The men can help to address any concerns or issues affecting the boys, answer questions and provide advice to the youth. I believe that when young people know their identity, their academic purposes and beyond this will help them to thrive. It is the duty of the people involved in their lives (the parents and so on) to guide them and support them in reaching their fullest potential.

P.T. What is the main message that you want the public to take from your book?

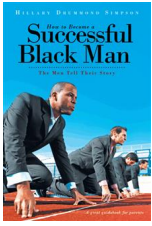
H.S. I want readers to know there are successful Black men in society, and not all of them were born with a silver spoon in their mouth. However, whatever their circumstances, they managed to strive. We need to find these role models and get them involved in mentoring. I believe the advice provided by these men might help some young Black males and others. It is a form of mentorship in itself, which can reach many people, and as I said earlier it gives guidance to parents also. Mothers also need to instill discipline and rigor in their sons. They have to learn that to achieve goals, it takes hard work. The expectations need to be higher. They have to aim for the best. Excellence is one of the greatest deterrents to discrimination. One of the founding fathers of my nation, Benjamin Franklin, said that "by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." For the believers, focus on God who will help you accomplish what you are supposed to do on this earth.

P.T. Thanks for the time Mrs. Simpson and for this very interesting interview. I also wish you a lot of success with your book!

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The book is available on www.hillarysimpson.net; www.amazon.com , .ca or www.barnesandnoble.com

www.facebook.com/Howtobecomeasuccessfulblackman

[Twitter@hillarydsimpson](https://twitter.com/hillarydsimpson)>

Excerpt from How To Become A Successful Black Man:



Mr. □ President Barack Obama: □ First Black President of the United States

At this time in American history, we have been graced with an African-American president. It would be irresponsible not to give honorable mention to the most recognized face of African-American male success: President Barack Obama. Although he was not available for an interview, President Obama relayed his wishes for success for this book through the press department of the White House.

The president's life growing up is well documented in his autobiography *Dreams from My Father*. So I thought it would be a good idea to review his life. Like 70 percent of African-American children today, he did not grow up with his father. However, President Obama had much support during his childhood, which contributed to his success today.

Loving and Supportive Family

Young Barack was blessed to have a loving, supportive mother and grandparents. His grandfather, Stanley Dunham, lovingly called "Gramps,"

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was very adventurous and enjoyed regaling his grandson with grand stories about the boy's father. He told his grandson that one thing he could learn from his dad, Barack Obama Sr., was confidence.

Male Guidance

When Barack and his mother moved to Indonesia to live with her new husband, Lolo, he made sure Barack (Barry) was treated as his own son. At one point, when it seemed that young Barry would become a victim of neighborhood bullies, his stepfather gave him hours of boxing lessons and taught him the importance of being prepared. When asked about the most important skill he needed as a man, his stepdad responded quickly, "Strength, if you can't be strong, be clever."

Committed Mother

Stanley Anna Dunham, his mother (named Stanley because her father wanted a boy), no doubt loved and was committed to her son. When he received a cut on his arm from mud-sliding with his friend, his mom naturally became frantic. Her husband tried to convince her to wait until the following day,

but she practically browbeat her neighbor into driving them to the hospital immediately. Being a single mom, she never allowed Barack's absence to be an excuse for him to slack off or not always do his best. She realized that his only chance to become successful was to get a good education, so she would wake him every morning at 4:00 a.m. five days a week for three hours of English study! When he complained, she responded, "This is no picnic for me either, Buster." His complaints did not deter her. She knew what she needed to do as his mom, and she was committed to him getting the best education. As a white mother to a black child, she exposed him to his history and taught him lessons of honesty, fairness, straight talk, and independent judgment. She could have easily taught her son to dislike his father, but she filled his head with positive things about Barack Sr. Even though his mother was equally intelligent, she explained his thick eyebrows by saying, "Your eyebrows are from me, but your brains are from your father."

So even though Barack did not grow up with his father, he did not use that as an excuse to live a mediocre life. Of course, he later had to reconcile his absence in his life. But he used his lack of a father to fuel the fire to be the committed father he is today. More importantly, he was able to identify with a positive image of his father, a confident, smart, and charismatic figure. And that, no doubt, helped him to become the confident, intelligent and influential man he is today.

Lesson — *Parents, education is preparation for your child's future. Expect and accept nothing less than the best education. If you or your child is inconvenienced, so be it; that's the price you sometimes have to pay for success. As a single parent, do not fill your child's mind with negative images and thoughts of the other parent. It may satisfy your need for revenge, but it only serves to fill your child with self-loathing. Handle the issues with the other parent in private. Speak only of the positive, and let the child know that no matter what, the other parent loves him.*

If possible, surround your child with good, supportive grandparents and other relatives. You will certainly need their help and support during the child's life. Remember, it takes a village! A child cannot receive too much love. Young Barack certainly couldn't have become the man he is today without the love

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and nurturing of his extended family.

For more information go to: <http://hillarydrummondsimpson.authorsxpress.com>

1 Although he was not available for an interview, Mr. President Obama relayed his wishes for success for this book through the press department of the White House.

2 72% of American prisoners, both state and federal are in jail for non-violent crimes. Almost 70% are people of color, and the majority of the offenses are either substance-related (drugs) or "sustenance-related" (this means breaking the law to make a living). Most American prisoners are undereducated with low-income. In addition, the majority of convicts are men of color -- and they have great chance to remain undereducated with low-income if no viable options are offered to them for bettering themselves.

3 According to a 2006 report from the Schlott Foundation, 58 percent of Black boys do not graduate from high school, and in New York City only 26 percent do.