

Danny Givens on a mission to turn lives around

Written by Ivan Phifer, Staff Writer
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Danny Givens is living proof that, A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps. ~Proverbs 16:9.

Givens, a men's advocate for the African American's Men's Project at North Point Health and Wellness Center, 1313 Penn Ave. N. runs the project's re-entry program. The program assists men returning to the community from prison with health care, education and employment.

"We have this psycho-social support model to help bridge the gap between the mental health side of things, and men dealing with the challenges they face coming home from prison, in order to be able to matriculate back into society," said Givens.

The philosophy of restoration guides the program's assistance in employment, education and healthcare. "The most important piece of this is healthcare," Givens said. "Your health is your wealth. The problem is not landing a job, but sustaining it. For example, if you get a job and your health fails you... you need dental work or an up to date physical exam, you now have to take days off work, days you do not have being new to the job. You are presenting yourself as a liability to your new employer," he said.

Motivated from personal experience, Givens has literally been on both sides of the gun.

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Born and raised in St. Paul's Selby-Dale community, his influences were of two different worlds. "My father was a drug dealer and a pimp. My mother, on the other hand, is a college graduate, who imposed education on us. It was a double life style. On one hand, I was a great student, but I was still in the streets for recreation," he said.

At the age of 18, Givens committed an armed robbery at a St. Paul nightclub, which turned into a face-off with an off duty police officer. "We both shot each other. Thankfully, we both lived," he said.

Givens went to prison for 12 years following the incident. During this time, Givens started questioning his actions and his life. "I realized I needed to do a deeper work. I started having questions why I was engaged in the behavior I was in," he said.

Looking deeper involved three perspectives: faith, family and education.

Givens received his first college degree from St. Cloud State University while in prison. He also obtained three vocational trade diplomas in cabinet making, floor installation and carpentry.

"Six years into my prison sentence, I realized I had leadership qualities inside of me, but I was using them for the wrong reason," Givens said.

In June of 2002, Givens gave his life to Christ and started preaching shortly after. "I really started becoming aggressive in seeing men's lives progress for the better. The driving impetus was God saying to me 'I want you to be unto others what no one has been to you,' " he said.

Givens grew up attending New Hope Baptist Church, a pillar institution in the St. Paul community led by the Reverend Kneely Williams. Rev. Williams' son, the late Pastor Arnold Williams, branched off to start a contemporary non-denominational church called River of Life, which also grew to become an institutional community pillar in St. Paul.

Givens recalls two occasions where he was told his calling was ministry.

"I was 10 or 11 years old. My grandmother said 'you're too old to go to Sunday school; I want you to start attending Men's Worship. My grandfather was a deacon in the church and leading Men's Worship that morning. I was asked to lift my hands up to the Lord. When I did, it felt like something took me off. I was scared because I was selling dope at that time. I got home, told my grandmother and she began leaping and shouting 'You're going to grow up to be a preacher.'"

"I thought to myself, 'yeah right, I ain't sweating out my good clothes preaching,'" he said.

Another encounter with a similar outcome was what convinced Givens.

"A couple years later, Joseph Jennings, a fiery Evangelist from Philadelphia held a revival at the church. He had all the young men come up, pulled me out of 15 of my friends and said to me

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‘You’re going to be a preacher.’”

“That was the foundation of it all,” he said. “I knew I was called to the ministry.”

After his release from prison, he enrolled in Bethel University in the Christian Ministry program. “It enhanced the biblical truths I already held close to my life,” Givens said.

He graduated in May of this year and founded Above Every Name Ministries, with his wife Pastor Roslyn Givens.

The mission of Above Every Name is summed up in what Givens calls the three R’s: “The church is a place to relate, a place to receive and place to be released.” He said, “The name comes from the scripture in Philippians 2:9: Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is Above Every Name.”

Givens points at his own father in explaining how a father-son relationship affects African American males mentally and socially. “My father was married to the game. So as long as I was in the game with him, I had his attention. But when I decided to change, that’s when the conflicts came,” he said.

This absence of a productive relationship with a father leads to what Givens describes as social stigma.

“I thought about the countless numbers of men, women and children, who have this narrative of a father that is missing, and who don’t know they have a father in heaven,” he said. “I thought about the men in our community, and all the names given to us: deadbeat dads, losers, no good, crackheads, goonz, d-boys, ignorant, niggaz, criminals. These are all names that stigmatize and create social and emotional scars that lead us to embrace and to act out the names imposed upon and spoken over us,” Givens said.

Givens also points out the status of Black love in our community and how it plays a part in the stigmatization.

“One of the things that is really missing from our community is Black love. We have it in our community, but it is not celebrated. Nor is it mainstream or fashionable,” he said. “It takes a whole lot of a man to be able to uplift the woman and celebrate her; call a woman a wife and acknowledge the innovative power of mothering and nurturing,” said Givens.

Givens was part of the celebrity panel for the 2010 United Negro College Fund (UNCF) Empower Me Tour last November at the University of Minnesota.

Above Every Name Ministries is located at 1890 Randolph Ave. St. Paul MN 55105. For more information, 612-293-6716 or email Danny Givens @ pastordanny@aboveeveryname.org