



Tillman Breckinridge served as the keynote speaker for the 2015 African American Male Summit. Breckenridge, a Tallwood High School graduate, is now a lawyer in the Washington, D.C. area. He was selected as a member of Virginia's Legal Elite for Appellate Law in 2014 as well as named a "Trailblazer Under 40"

by the National Bar Association. Below is a copy of his address from the African American Male Summit, titled **"Your Unfair Burden: Taking Responsibility for your Actions and the Actions of Others."**

Good morning, I want to thank you all for coming. I'm happy to have been invited to talk to you all about taking responsibility for yourselves and taking responsibility for others. It is an unfair burden that you have as young, African-American men, but if we are ever going to advance, if we are ever going to close the many achievement gaps that exist, we must take responsibility not only for ourselves, but for others as well

I start where Mr. Williams left off last year. For those of you who were not here last year, a very quick summary – he talked about being proud about who you are. And he talked about how a lot of people out there use misleading statistics to make it sound like you aren't worth anything. He said you are worth something. That is a critical point to advancing and figuring out how we can move forward as young black men. You are worth something.

Now, the flip side of that is there are challenges that we are facing as a people. There are achievement gaps. And that's where I want to take umbrage with some of what Mr. Williams said. He said, quote "The children are not the problem. The system is the problem." I don't think that does justice to the fact that there can be and is more than one source of our problems. He focused on the system. I'm going to focus on the children. One, because he effectively covered the system, and two, because as you sit there, you can do more about the children than you can do about the system.

We need to work on the system AND we need to work on the children. So while he talked about a lot of statistics that are not true or are not robust if you look behind them, there are plenty of statistics out there that show we are not doing as well as we should—we are not doing as well as our counterparts in other races. That is a fact that we must accept if we are going to move forward, because there is no progress without recognizing where you are in the first place.

The truth stands somewhere in the middle. We are not achieving what we need to be. Otherwise, there would be no African American Male Summit. It exists because there is a gap in achievement.

Two weeks ago today, my secretary and friend, Gwen, buried her 25 year-old son. Sure, the system failed him and his friends at many turns. But the system didn't shoot him. Almost certainly, another young Black man did. And until we take responsibility for our own choices, and indeed, the choices of our friends, and the kids down the block, the system will lag with us.

I'm starting to get in positions where I can work to fix the system. You're in a position where you can help us fix ourselves. I have four young, beautiful Black daughters. They are going to grow up to be heartbreakers once I start letting them date in 30 or 40 years. The oldest is 5, so we have some time. But the bottom line is I'm worried about you guys, AND I'm worried about the kids coming behind you. And YOU need to be worried about not just yourselves, but the kids coming behind you.

Is it fair that you have this burden at 16 or 17? No, absolutely not. But so long as young men of achievement just concern themselves with making themselves better, we will not get better as a group.

How do we become better? You guys have taken the first step. You're here. You've taken time out on a Saturday morning to enrich yourselves. And so, continue to do those things. Continue to be better. And don't be bitter about the fact that life is unfair to you. You're not going to change that right now, and so you have to focus on changing it for the people behind you. Because I'll tell you what: your life is more fair than mine was, and my life is more fair than my

parents' were, and so on back generation by generation. We are making progress.

That progress cannot end. And therefore, you have to be great on your end, and an example to others. It is an unfair burden that I have taken on, and it is an unfair burden that you must take on if we are to advance.

And how do I mean that? I'll take you back to a story from when I was in elementary school. It was when I realized the power of being a good example. I was the captain of the patrols ... or as my boy Mike put it, head geek. I wasn't a very good student. I'll concede that. I didn't get great grades, but thankfully, there are opportunities to come back from that.

I had gotten a D in something, after being captain of the patrols for half the school year. So, I avoided the teacher in charge of the patrols, and finally she caught up with me and said, "You know you can't remain captain of the patrols if you have a D in anything." I said, "Ok, so what does that mean?" She said "It means you won't be captain anymore."

She said I could come back as a regular patrol when my grade came up.

I was pretty devastated. But at the same time, I knew it was my responsibility. I didn't get great grades because I didn't do my homework, and that was a choice I made, and so I had to accept the consequences of my choices. I didn't realize the impact of those consequences until I was standing in the portable behind the school, where we had sixth grade classes.

Yes, sixth grade was in elementary school back then.

Then, a couple of black guys in my class came up to me. They were guys I didn't have a strong relationship with. They were actually guys I had a bad relationship with. We didn't hate each other, but at the same time, they got into a little more trouble than I was willing to palate. It was College Park, and at least back then, you tended to get into a little trouble if you were from College Park, but they got into a little more than I was comfortable with. I just knew them, played basketball with them, occasionally got into a little scuffle with them.

They come up to me, and one says “Hey, aren’t you captain of the patrols?” I say “No.” The other one then says, “But you were captain of the patrols, right?” I say “Yeah.” And the other one says, “But they change that every month or something, right?” I thought about lying, but I said “No, I got a D, so I’m no longer the captain of the patrols.”

And then one of them said something that rocked me to my core.

I was waiting for them to make fun of me or whatever, but then one of them said, sincerely, “That’s a shame. It was good to see a Black guy in that position.” The other one said “Yeah, it was really good to see you there.”

I was floored. These guys who I never believed thought that much of me. These guys with whom I did not have a good relationship. They had found some bit of inspiration in the fact that I was doing something good, and that I was doing well with it. And they lost that. I had failed in my responsibility. That’s a matter of taking care of myself.

So I focused on making sure that I remained a good example of what we should be doing. I’m going to tell you I’m still ashamed of myself, though. Because from that point forward, I was a good example. But then I didn’t use that to then affect the lives of others directly. I hope there was some indirect effect. I hope there have been people out there who were inspired by me. And I will concede that I have gotten some feedback that some people have been inspired by seeing me.

That is not enough. So, what I am telling you is right now, where you sit, as a high schooler or middle schooler, you can affect change not only by being yourself and by being a good man yourself, but by telling others that they need to be good men too. Do not be afraid to be known for being good and smart and capable. Because that is one of the great scourges of our people – the notion that building the tools to be successful makes you somehow less Black.

No. You are a Black man either way. And you are a strong Black man when you take responsibility for yourself and others. When you take others on your back. When you get good grades, achieve, take care of your family, and mentor people

behind you. And that doesn't start when you're 25 years old like I did. It starts now.

That kid down the street that's about to get into trouble—he needs your guidance. Your little brother—he needs your guidance. Some kid on the internet who wants to get in a fight and post video—he needs your guidance. Understand that there is a world of people out there who can benefit from your goodness and knowledge. Use that power, because that is how we move forward. When we accept the unfair responsibility we have as successful, effective Black men to make other successful, effective Black men.

So this is my charge to you—go forward and be the man who stands in front of everyone and proclaims that I am good, I am successful, and I am going to take you with me.

Thank you.