

## **The “un-masked” Hero**

A hero can have many definitions, a hero might mean different things to different people. According to the dictionary, a hero is “a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.” I agree with this statement but I also disagree. My definition of a hero is someone who strives to make the world a better place. I believe anyone can be a hero, a hero is just an ordinary person who does an extraordinary thing.

What makes a hero? There are so many different components of what it takes to be a hero, but you don’t need to save lives or volunteer at homeless shelters to be a hero. A hero can be anyone who does something good. I think a hero should have these characteristics: brave, driven, selflessness, passionate, powerful, kind, and they should also have leadership abilities. I feel like many heroes have had an experience with something or someone that makes them driven to help with that problem. Many heroes are formed from simply realizing their problem and fixing it, then finding others who have the same problem and helping them fix it.

I had the wonderful opportunity to interview Ashanti Branch, he works to change how young men of color interact with their education and how their schools interact with them. He grew up with a single mother. He has liked to call himself a “mama’s boy” for a while now. I ask him what that meant to him when he was younger and what it means now. “Back then I didn’t like it, I didn’t call it that. To be a mama’s boy meant you were weak, you weren’t a man, you were wimpy.” He tells me, “It was a negative thing and I never would have accepted it, back then.” Now Ashanti owns it, he loves his mom and is super close with her. “There was a song I

used to listen to, it told me to resist being a mama's boy, and that it was weak to be close with your mom." He tells me, he now laughs at that song. Everyone has a different definition of what a "mama's boy" is, some will say it's a bad thing, Ashanti says your caring and loving and it's a good thing to be close with your mom. Ashanti is still very close with his mom, he tells me how he will always be her baby boy no matter how old he gets, she will still call him her baby.

"When I was 7 years old my uncle told me that I had to be the man of the house." Ashanti didn't know what that meant, it was hard for him. He didn't have a male figure in the house, so he only knew from tv, rappers, and video games. "I didn't want that responsibility, I wanted to be a normal kid and play outside. What would I do if an intruder came in?" He tells me. He knew, to be the man of the house he had to take care of other people, but he never wanted that label. He didn't enjoy his childhood because of this, he was mad, his uncle just put that pressure on him and he didn't want it. "Now I realize, my uncle was never doing it to hurt me, he thought he was helping me."

Ashanti's voice is calm and relaxed, but it starts to tense up as he tells me about his mother's boyfriend, hurting him and his mother. "It was domestic violence, people don't talk about it that much. I didn't know exactly what it was until I saw it, it really stood out to me." He tells me how people who have experienced it, go quiet, they are embarrassed about it, but Ashanti wants to talk about it. He wants victims to know that they are not alone and that people are here for them. Ashanti starts to bring up that the rule in his house was that whatever happens in the house stays in the house, and how it was hard for him to talk about it for a while. "How do we give people more opportunities to be more human? We be more open, it's not about the "me" it's about the "we" He tells me with passion.

I can tell Ashanti is a hero because of his passionate tone as he moves onto the topic of the mask. “The movie wanted to see the club I was running and wanted to interview some of my students. My job was to listen to the boys, but when they were getting interviewed they were lying to each other. They were saying their lives were perfect, and not talking about their problems.” It was hard for Ashanti to watch them do this because he knew what they were actually feeling and what their lives were actually like. The next class Ashanti told them to draw their masks, he told them to put down everything that they let people see and what they don’t let people see. “I didn’t think it was going to work, I was just trying it out.” When it worked, he was amazed. Responding to their energy was amazing.

Ashanti wasn’t always a teacher, before all of this he worked in engineering. “I didn’t want to leave engineering, I resisted being a teacher, but it was calling me, and I couldn’t get away from it.” He tells me how he was poor his whole life and he knew teaching didn’t make good money, he didn’t want to go back to being poor, after how hard he worked to gain money. “Back then I still had the mindset that it wasn’t cool to be smart. I didn’t want to be a nerd, not geeky, I didn’t want to come off smart, it was a bad thing.” Although he thought this way he still couldn’t get away from becoming a teacher, it was his destiny and there was no more hiding from it, he had to accept it.

Ashanti’s tone gets softer as I ask him about the current presidency and how he feels about how he influences masculinity in our society. “It makes me sad. I don’t understand why he says things that he says. I know people who are mean but for our president to call people names and be like this, is crazy to me.” Although Ashanti tries to stay positive. He has lots of fear for our society, but he can only control himself and his actions, he can’t control others. “Treat people

how they want to be treated. People want to be treated in different ways, why treat them how you want to be treated, if it's not how they want to be treated. You are only in charge of yourself." he tells me.

"A long distance that most people travel is 18 inches between their head and their heart. And most people get stuck in their head." Ashanti believes that this quote best describes his work and how he feels about what he's doing. "So many people get stuck in their head and they don't listen to their heart, I think more people need to listen to their heart instead of their head." He tells me.

You might be wondering why I chose Ashanti as my hero. I had the opportunity to meet him when he came to speak at my school. He talked about the mask and had us draw our masks. The way he approached us was so powerful and I felt so moved by him. What Ashanti was doing was opening my eyes, of how I see myself and how I see others. It shifted my mindset and I believe it made me a better person. Ashanti is my hero in so many ways and even though his work might not look like it connects to me, if you dig a little deeper, you can see that it connects to everyone on a high level. He is the un-masked hero, he lets us see everything.