

Introduction: Where I've Been

A lot can change in three years. Before coming to the Philly Free School, I attended 5 other schools, from private schools, to charter schools, to online cyber schools and I was never really satisfied. I always found myself asking, "When am I ever going to need to know this outside of school?" Coming into the school my main goal was to prove others wrong. I always struggled in conventional schooling systems. I was always trying to please my teachers and parents with good grades, or trying to keep up with other students. I didn't know how to deal



with the constant pressure of competing with other students. So I dealt with it by doing nothing, I just gave up for awhile. I guess doing nothing was how I expressed my confusion and lack of motivation 3 years ago. People didn't understand me and I didn't really understand myself. One teacher

told me I should just pick out the box I was going to have to live in because she thought I would amount to nothing.

When I first found out about PFS, I didn't understand it. My mom was telling me how kids ran the school and that there were no teachers. This left me confused and wondering if this was even a legitimate school. I didn't know at all what to expect or what to do with my time, so I spent a lot of time in my first few weeks here thinking. I mean really thinking about real life situations, not petty math problems or something. Thinking about what I could achieve from being at this school. I realized that whatever I may or may not achieve would be nobody's fault but my own. If I needed to learn something like math or world culture, those subjects are

available to me. There are students and staff, plenty of computers for online research, and hundreds of books. People were more than willing to help me in any way I needed, whether it be finding a music tutor or doing math problems. In fact, I remember my first week at school. Every day I would come home to my mom with a random fact about world history, world culture, etc. from internet research I had done in a matter of minutes. This was key because even though I didn't really care for academics, my mom was very skeptical about the school. Doing this reassured her, because she was in the mindset that if you weren't being told facts by a teacher in a conventional school then you weren't learning anything. It also reassured me knowing that I could learn whatever I thought was necessary at my own pace. Everyone thought of PFS as my last chance to do well in school, but the way I see it, it was my first chance. My first chance to explore freely, my first chance to make a mistake and actually learn from that mistake, my first chance to be me and not what someone else wanted me to be, and my first time to use my time as I saw fit.

Time

PFS gave me the opportunity to decide how to spend my time, time to think about what my priorities should be. I always felt that conventional school was taking time away from what I found important. I never got the chance to work on mastering anything in conventional school because all my time went into topics I didn't care about. Author Malcolm Gladwell says it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill. How was I going to find 10,000 hours to master a skill when I was wasting all my time memorizing isolated facts that were going to take me nowhere? While at the Philly Free School, I decided my two priorities were music and leadership. The school gave me the time to begin mastering these two things.

I've learned a lot about myself, who I truly am and how to please myself over others. Now at PFS I'm only competing with myself and using my time to make my own decisions. I set my own standards for myself. I decide whether I'm good at something and when I need to work on it. I've figured out that I have a hard time expressing myself with words. It was really frustrating trying to figure this about because I didn't know anything about expression. People would ask me how I felt about something and I wouldn't have the slightest clue what to say. Not that I wasn't feeling anything, but it's just I didn't know what words to use to express my feelings. This was a very frustrating part of my life. Even now expressing myself with words is something I struggle with. I learned who I was as an individual from the time given to me from PFS. I learned the stages of mastery, and most importantly I learned how I express myself the best: through music.

Music

Music is how I communicate with the world. This includes the music I make by myself and with others and the music I listen to. I've had times where I made songs with friends without saying a word because my guitar, bass, and drums do all the talking for me. I've played drums for about seven years now and I never really saw myself playing anything else until I came to PFS because I didn't think I had time to learn how. At the school I had a lot of time, so one day I just decided I want to learn guitar. I started getting lessons from a staff member. This was an on and off occasion for a few months. I would practice guitar for about 45 minutes a day. I wasn't really taking it seriously because I was so focused on drums which I



practiced a minimum of 2 hours a day. Then I started thinking about my future in music and became more interested in writing music. I was a competent enough drummer at that point but wanted to carry that over to another instrument. Since guitar is so essential to the melody of a song, I needed to learn guitar so that I could compose.

Recently I decided I wanted to play bass also, and I did. I practiced a school bass for about a few hours a day consistently for two months until I acquired my own bass. I traded my laptop for another student's bass, and I played it for 17 hours that day, from when I got it at 8:30 a.m to 2:48 a.m. when I finally put it down after my fingers started bleeding. It was something I was dedicated to and I still am. I practice each instrument now at least an hour a day. I realise I don't need a band to make music: I can do it myself because I know how to play 3 different instruments on a competent level. I still want to play in a band and travel the world, but now I have more than one way to make it in the music industry. Whenever I tell someone that I want to be a professional musician, the first thing they ask me is what makes me think I'm qualified to do this, which is a very good question. I realize that more than getting good at your instrument is required if you want a career in music. You need exposure; someone needs to hear your music. There are a lot of mediocre musicians out there who have millions of fans and make millions of dollars for one reason only: a lot of people know their music. At school, I learned from a drummer in a popular band a little about exposure. He told me to use music streaming websites to promote myself, like SoundCloud and YouTube. So I did: I made a YouTube channel to post my music to, but more than that, I started posting other bands' music as well. The YouTube channel I created is dedicated to helping other bands get noticed and to support the metal community in general. So far I have a handful of videos uploaded and several thousand views.

Leadership

I've been given a lot of musical opportunities at PFS, but another thing I got here was the opportunity to take on several leadership positions. I started a committee to come up with a motion for School Meeting about having a sleepover at the school. It was a diverse group from little kids to staff. The main role I played was bringing up situations and letting them debate how they would be handled, like what would we do if a kid was infringing on everyone's rights. Would we say that if a student was misbehaving his/her parents had to pick them up even if it was at 1 in the morning? Would we have permission slips? What would happen if a student wanted to go home? We all came up with ideas for rules specific to the sleepover, deciding whether we should have JC late at night for serious cases and who would be a part of that JC, and figuring out how we would feed people, whether it be pizza or having kids bring their own food. After all

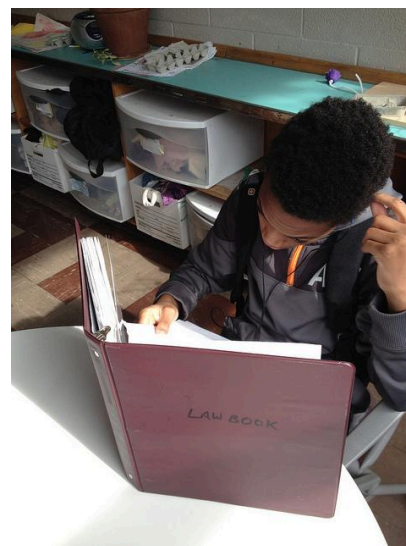


this we had to split into teams for various jobs, such as collecting money, ordering food, and making and handing out permission slips.

Everyone on the committee attended School Meeting for our motion to be discussed. It took a few tries for us to get it passed, but each week we kept coming back with even better plans than the previous week, and finally our motion passed.

We went through a similar process for two more sleepovers over the next year. All the sleepovers went smoothly and everyone always had a good time. So far, a Night JC has never needed to be conducted, and no student has ever been sent home in the middle of the night for poor behavior. Through working on these committees, I learned a lot about teamwork and persistence.

I was JC clerk for over 5 months, handling hundreds of cases. I had to deal with many different scenarios on JC and I had to come up with a solution to each problem in a small window of time. For example, sometimes there was a huge volume of cases, so I would take the time, before JC, to organize the cases so we could get through all the business in the least amount of time possible. I took many steps to make JC run more efficiently, such as handling all of one defendant's cases at one time so we didn't waste time calling the defendant back into the JC, cutting down on random chit chatting, and keeping JC members active and focused by asking them questions directly. I learned that when people are addressed individually for an opinion, they feel more important to the team and actually feel like their decision matters. I would sometimes ask the younger kids serving on JC to act as JC Runner (going to get those needed for the next case) because sitting in a chair for 2 hours at a time would make it hard for them to focus. Another struggle was dealing with those who had information for JC but were reluctant or nervous to share. These types of people were tricky and took some getting used to. For example, some kids might claim they didn't remember something happening, like leaving their lunch out. Usually a quick picture would jog their memory, but if a picture wasn't on hand, I would ask them who they ate with or what room they ate in to help them remember what happened. There were also people who were nervous to share information out of fear of getting in trouble. These were tough as well and required more work from JC and witnesses. We had to make sure that that was our guy, but once we were positive a rule was broken, the best way to get a confession was to run down all the evidence and witness testimony and remind the defendant that JC was really nothing to fear if



they worked with us. I had to be very patient as JC Clerk. I couldn't lose my mind 2 hours into JC because I was the one running the meeting. JC was long and towards the end I had to keep a fair mindset and not just give an unfair sentence to someone because my patience was running low. Because of all the JC cases I've handled, I've learned about decision making and fairness. Whenever the school needs me to clerk, I don't shy away because I am more confident in my leadership.

I used to be shy around groups of people. I didn't want to be a shy reserved person growing up. I knew that a lot of things in life require other people, so I wanted to work on my people skills. Because of this I started doing public speaking for the school. I spoke at school fairs, open houses, and tabled at public events. Talking to people about the school really opened me up to the public. I talked to all different types of people about the school in different environments, answering some pretty tough questions. Whenever I have talked with people



about the school, I have always evaluated myself, thinking about what I said wrong and what I said right. I would look back to see if I answered the person's question thoroughly so that I wouldn't make any of the same mistakes talking to the next person. I read people better now. I've learned what tones to take when dealing with different people such as the shy kid,

the aggressive adult, etc. For example if a person were to walk past a school table at a fair with a look of interest, instead of letting them walk past I'd give them a friendly greeting and ask them if they had heard of our school. Or if someone I was talking to looked uncertain or confused, I would simply ask if I had answered their question, to open the door for them to tell

me what they're confused about. Because of the years I spent talking to different types of people, I am more confident in my social skills.

After my second year at PFS, I actually was going to start my diploma process, but I felt I wasn't ready. I was too nervous to leave the school because I didn't have a plan. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and even if I did know, I wouldn't know how to go about it. I was pretty lost and felt irrelevant to the world. Plus I hadn't begun the diploma process in time, so I wouldn't have been able to get a diploma. I want a diploma for several reasons. One is to appease my family. Another is because I will be the first at my school to get a diploma. The school has never been through the diploma process so I wanted to go through it for my community. Maybe the most important reason I want a diploma is to show how much I have accomplished here. Last year, I wasn't sure if I was ready and figured if I were ready I would totally be 100 percent confident with no doubt at all. I knew I could figure all this out if I did another year at the school and be the best me I could be. Since then a PFS staff member gave me the chance to work at the restaurant he works at. I washed dishes for about a month. It gave me a different perspective because I had never had a job that fast paced. It was rough getting used to at first, but I adapted, worked hard and earned the nickname Barry Allen because of how fast I worked in the kitchen. Working in the restaurant helped me learn more about teamwork, time management, and efficiency. Working that job made me feel more confident in graduating because it gave a better sense of what working was like. Now I can use this information moving forward for any other jobs I take in the future.

Conclusion: Where I'm Going

I can use these skills in all areas of life. One of the jobs I want is to work in a studio as a sound engineer. With this job I'll be dealing with plenty of different people daily. Patience, teamwork, determination, efficiency, and people skills are important in this job because in a

studio environment people need to feel comfortable while you get the job done. When I'm mixing people's music, adding different compression, amplifiers, and effects, and I ask if they like what I did to their song, they're going to give me a lot of pushback. Then I have to go back to do it all over again, hoping they will like the new sound. Just like JC, the process of editing audio files is long and tedious: patience and persistence is essential. I've been told from professionals staying cool will attract more people and give me a good name in the music industry. I will use the skills I have learned to make it easy for musicians to communicate anything to me, so that I can succeed as a Sound Engineer.

What makes me think I'm ready now? I know how to have fun and make friends, but I don't mind working hard. I have a solid understanding of what fairness feels like. I'm not afraid to make mistakes or admit to my own mistakes. I keep an open mind. I'm serious about personal responsibility. I understand that there are people in my community who might be willing and able to help me. I'm not afraid to ask for help. I'll always be practicing my music and I'll continue to keep my name out there as a musician. I also enjoy taking on leadership roles and carrying my weight in the community. Even with these strengths I know I'll face my share of obstacles. There are a lot of bands out there trying to get noticed, and it's going to be a grind trying to make it over all these other bands. I'm going to have to work hard and motivate my band members to work just as hard. Learning Sound Engineering will take time. I am working with sound engineering tools now to learn the basics but, I won't be able to work in a studio until I have learned more advanced skills. On top of that, I'll still need to make money. I'm 18 years old



and still with my parents, so I need to prepare to live on my own. Nonetheless, I'll move forward and use the skills I've learned at my school to get what I want out of life. I will use the leadership skills and patience I acquired in JC, the teamwork I learned from committee work, the people skills I learned at the public events I spoke at, and the feeling of mastery I got from the hours I put into each musical instrument. On a practical level, here's my five year plan.

Year 1

Money: I plan to get a job and start saving money. At the moment, I'm flexible and not paying rent so I'll be able to save anything I make. Right now I'm looking at jobs in restaurants and dog walking. I have already reached out to a restaurant and a dog walking company, and I am currently part of a catering team. I anticipate having steady employment within a month of graduating, if not sooner.

Computer: I want to buy a computer because it is so essential for the career I want to pursue. I'll use it to learn more about the basics of sound engineering, and gain more experience using the tools so that I can be more respected in this field. I'll also use it to continue working on my YouTube channel and networking with other musicians.

Music: In my first year I also want to make my own EP and have it be released on BandCamp and SoundCloud. I'm trying to build a portfolio for myself as a musician and a reference point for future employers in music. Each year in this 5 year plan I want to make an EP or album. I'm also going to go to a lot of shows at various places like clubs, cafes, churches, etc. to start networking. My dad is a musician who made money from gigs and played with a fair amount of well known musicians such as Jill Scott, Justin Timberlake, etc. He told me this was the best approach to getting gigs and playing for people.

Internship: I am currently pursuing an internship at one of several recording studios here in Philadelphia that my dad is associated with. That way I can see what it's like inside of an actual recording studio and make some great connections with local musicians and learn a lot.

Year 2

Money: The internship will most likely be done by year 2. Ideally, the studio where I interned would hire me, but if not I'll keep whichever job I had during the internship. I'll be putting money away for a car.

Music: I want to pursue my solo playing more. This is because I want to put my name out there as a studio musician and let people get familiar with me in particular before I play with a group of other people in a band. Hopefully the networking I did in year one will land me some gigs.

Transportation: During year 2, I plan on getting my license and my own car because it will make it easier to get to my commitments.

Year 3

Housing: In the 3rd year my main goal will be to move out of my mom's house if I haven't already done so by then.

Money: In my 3rd year at my job, I should be qualifying for a raise to help me pay rent.

Music: At this point I plan on having consistent gigs to add to my income. I'll be researching and networking to start building a foundation for my own sound studio.

Year 4

Music: In the 4th year I want to start giving lessons for bass, drums and guitar because it will be good money and there are a lot of people who don't even know where to start in playing an instrument. I'm interested in teaching all ages, whether it will be private tutoring or part of a class. I'll still be playing gigs and shows.

Money: In addition to paying rent and daily expenses I'll be putting money aside to purchase my own equipment for my own sound studio.

Year 5

Music: By my 5th year, I'll be on my way to be a well regarded musician. I also want to partner with sound engineers to find a space to house our equipment to professionally record other people's music.

Money: My income from gigs, teaching music, and recording music should allow me to quit my day job and still pay my expenses.

Just like at PFS, I know that whatever I may or may not achieve out in the world will be nobody's fault but my own.