

PEOPLE WHO INSPIRE

WITH MUSIC
AND IMAGINATION,

HE CREATED
A LIFE WITHOUT
LIMITS.

WHITE

RICHARD ANTOINE

AS TOLD TO CHARIS DIETZ PHOTOGRAPH BY DARREN DURLACH / EARLY LIGHT MEDIA

MY mother had this incredible singing voice. And when she would sing—out in those cold nights on the Baltimore streets where we lived when I was small—the music would wrap around us like an invisible, protective force field. Sometimes I'd wake up alone in the damp grass of the park hours later to find that Mom had gone in search of a bottle tucked into a brown paper bag. But when she sang to me or we sang "Greased Lightning" together, it was all gonna be OK.

Music was my first form of comfort, a safe place in an otherwise scary reality. But it was my imagination that made music out of my life. As a child on the streets, I could so vividly envision a warm blanket that a real, tangible warmth would creep over my body. I could dream up a chicken sandwich so juicy that my hunger would, if only for a moment, subside. The gift of being able to see things as they could be saved my life on those streets. It let me enter another dimension—one where anything was possible. There I could dream, and boldly.

When I first came across a tuba—or really what was a smaller Frankenstein version of a sousaphone—I was in sixth-grade band class. So what if I could barely hold the thing upright at the time? There was only one tuba in the band, and I was determined I would be the kid playing it.

Hours, days, weeks, months, I spent alone in a little room with a black box of a cassette tape player, learning notes by ear. A mechanical voice would come on: "Hello. Welcome to the tuba. This is B-flat. Doooooooo. When you have mastered B-flat, we will move on to C." Pause. Rewind. Play it again. And again. And again.

It was slow going, but playing music was like a light going on in the dark for me. It let me communicate in a way I had never been able to before.

When I asked my foster dad, who later became Dad to me, to drive me to an audition for the Baltimore School for the Arts, I had no idea that the other kids could read music. I'm not sure I even knew that reading music was a thing. Playing by ear was

all I knew. But I had the sounds and the notes deep inside of me by then, and I could tell a story with them as they hit the air. Turns out the ability to tell a good story, to reach out through the music, is exactly what that audition committee was hungry for. My seeming disadvantage was my superpower.

I did eventually learn to read music at the Baltimore School for the Arts. But I've never stopped tapping into my imagination when I'm playing, even when I'm reading a piece of music that was written a century ago. I picture the composer and what was happening in their world at that time. I try to let the notes they put down on the page speak to me. What story did the composer need or want to tell?

That's a question I ask myself too. Not just in music, but in the composition of my life. What is the story I'm telling? I want it to be one that inspires hope.

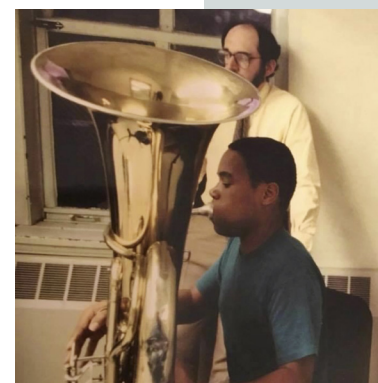
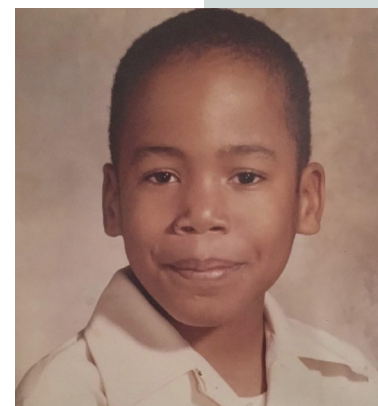
I think the world would say my greatest accomplishment is that I came from nothing and became successful. Maybe they would point to me becoming the principal tubist in a symphony orchestra or earning my doctorate from one of the most competitive music programs in the country. But I know my greatest achievement is my job as a teacher. Every day I get to touch students' lives in a way where I can see the lightbulb of possibilities click on in their heads.

They'll say, "Dr. White, I can't play this piece. This is too hard." And I know they're talking about more than the difficulty of the composition. They're talking about life and how they see their own limits.

"Play the first note," I tell them. "Now play the last note." And then I say, "See? We've got the beginning and the ending. Now all we've got to do is play through the middle." Their faces light up. They begin the piece again, this time with a little more hope. It's not perfect yet, but they're making music.

That's what we get to do in this life together: play through the middle. We all have the same notes to choose from. It's how we put them together that makes all the difference.

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is a tenured professor at the University of New Mexico and principal tubist of The Santa Fe Symphony and the New Mexico Philharmonic. He is the first African American in the world to receive a doctorate in music for tuba performance. Richard can be seen on Magnolia Network this fall in *Hi, I'm ____*.

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