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Our Voices

VJ Smith: Community Leader Started at MCTC

On a recent tour of MCTC's campus, VJ Smith kept checking the time. He couldn't be late to his appointment to ride the bus with newly-elected Minneapolis mayor [Betsy Hodges](#).



Now a source of stability and dedication in the North Minneapolis community, VJ took many paths and navigated some rough times. After he graduated high school, VJ took to the streets. "I didn't have anybody to mentor me," he said. He changed his name 10 times in 10 years and fell in with the drug community. After a few years of travel he found himself talking with a pastor at a local church in Oklahoma City. "The pastor reached out to me and made a meaningful connection," said VJ. "When he asked me my name, it was hard for me to find an answer. That's when I started making some changes in my life."

VJ returned to Minnesota, but his former community—the drug community—would no longer connect with him. After a long search, he took a job as a dishwasher. "It was hard—really hard—to go from making thousands of dollars every week to making a dishwasher's wage," he said. He began school at the University of Minnesota, but was challenged by the big-school feel. "A friend got realistic with me and told me to try something smaller. He told me his brother was director of the African American Student Center at a nearby college that was smaller and more manageable. So I switched gears and started school at MCTC."

From then on, VJ pursued leadership. He founded MCTC's first African American Student Association, and in the mid-90s became the first male African American president of the MCTC Student Senate.

"Through my experiences, I've learned that education is one of the most important things in the life of someone who is marginalized," said VJ. "If people come from a destructive home, they're not going to be healthy. They need the support of community leaders and mentors to become healthy."

After finishing his education at MCTC and founding the Minneapolis branch of [MAD DADS](#)—a national non-profit organization emphasizing the importance of positive community role models—VJ learned that Metro Transit was having a hard time with violence on metro buses. VJ and MAD DADS introduced their concept of the "peace bus," and sat four members of MAD DADS on each bus to lead riders in songs, poetry and, most importantly, peaceful engagement. This day, Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges would join VJ and the MAD DADS to experience the ride and the power of community firsthand.



"Our goal with the peace buses was to encourage other people to take a stand, to stand up to violence and crime on buses," said VJ. Now the current president of the MAD DADS national chapter, VJ works as a liaison between communities of disenfranchised residents of Minneapolis' north side and the programs, services and resources they need. "At MAD DADS, our biggest challenge is to teach people—particularly young men—that there's something called a future."

Walking the halls of his alma mater on his recent tour, VJ took in the newly renovated areas of campus and greeted an MCTC student by name. "How's your mom?" he asked. VJ attended MCTC with the student's mother two decades earlier.

Another student, a leader of MCTC's [Students Against Hunger and Homelessness](#) club, led VJ on a tour of the expanded [Helland Center](#). Formerly homeless himself, the student had worked with VJ prior to enrolling at MCTC to set goals and find the resources he needed. "I created a new family here at MCTC," the student said. "I didn't have any support outside of school."

"My organization helps take non-mentored, non-parented kids who are grown now and want to go on to do things like attending MCTC, and helps them build their lost history," said VJ. "They've been educated to the streets. We need to help them build their history, and then educate them to the future."

After the tour of MCTC's campus, VJ departed right on time. He had an important appointment with the mayor—on the bus.

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