

Key to success: Put business before play

Reuther grad says students' work ethic can help reach goals

BY CHRIS BARNCARD

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Jahmal Cole knows at least 50 reasons why you won't succeed.

You:

Have other things to do with your time.

Have no funding.

Don't live in New York.

Are too old or too young.

Won't ask for help.

Always blame your parents.

Are unwilling to have irrational confidence in your abilities.

And on and on.

"I've used 40 of them," Cole said Thursday from the foot of the Reuther High School auditorium stage. "How many have you used? Write them down and get rid of them."

The 23-year-old self-published author and college admission adviser kept a crowd of Reuther students hushed and attentive, probably because — as a member of the school's Class of 2001 — he was speaking to a mirror.

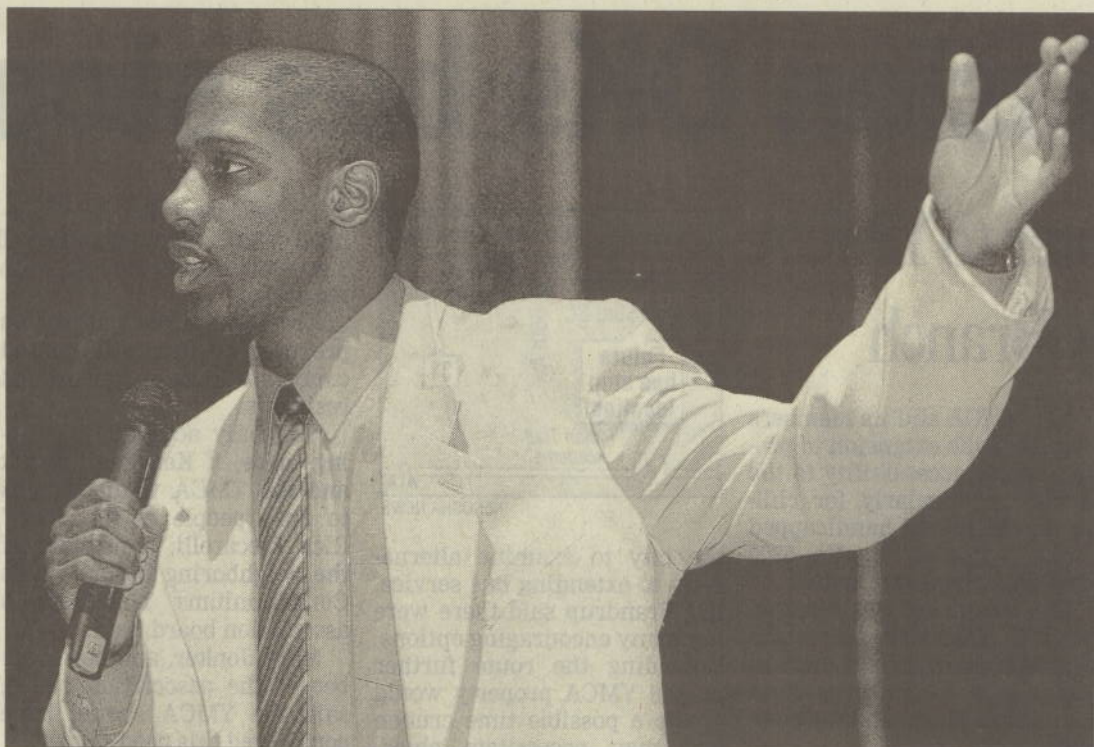
"I used to walk down the halls. I used to sit in these seats. I am you," he said. "I won't paint a picture of something you can't attain."

But, he said, the students can attain an awful lot — even if it looks out of their reach — by doing a little work.

After his freshman year at Tremper High School, Cole was a wreck. His family bounced in and out of homeless shelters. He was a C-minus student. He was not about to turn things around. He didn't care about school, he said, because he had no reason to believe he would ever be successful.

Transferring to Reuther, and getting his first A grade, changed him. He came to understand that straight-A students were no different than he was.

"That student's work ethic is all that separates them," Cole said. "All they do is say, 'Before I go out with my friends or make that phone call, I'm going



KENOSHA NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN POIRIER

Reuther graduate and self-published author Jahmal Cole, 23, speaks to Reuther students Thursday of how he has overcome obstacles in his life through hard work and believing in his dream.

'THAT (STRAIGHT-A) STUDENT'S WORK ethic is all that separates them. All they do is say, 'Before I go out with my friends or make that phone call, I'm going to take care of my business.'"

Jahmal Cole
self-published author

to take care of my business."

And yet, he couldn't rescue his grades enough to make his dream of attending Howard University come true. Eventually, he had a heart-to-heart with a guidance counselor who suggested that the military or trade school would be more realistic choices.

He didn't take it well. When his counselor was distracted by a phone call Cole flipped open a guide to colleges to a random page — Wayne State College in Nebraska — ripping it out and stuffing it in his pocket. He called the school from a Reuther pay phone, making sure that they had both a basketball team and a business major. Wayne State took him in.

"I carried that acceptance letter around all summer to

show people who didn't believe me," he said.

When it came time to go, he said, his mother scolded him for not getting a job in Kenosha and maintaining his station in life. His friends laughed.

"One of them actually said, 'You're going out to Nebraska with all those white people? I'm staying here,'" Cole said, shaking his head. "That's what he said to me."

On the 11-hour drive to Nebraska the U-Haul his father rented ran out of gas twice, requiring Cole to pump most of the available money out of his emergencies-only credit card. And then, when he got there, there was just more work to do. He walked on to the basketball team, picking up a mentor in coach Rico Burkett. Burkett wore Cole out during his

tryouts, and kept the rudderless student on task by convincing him that he could work his way to a degree.

"They want to see if you have the ability to stick something out," Cole said Thursday. "They want to see if you have it in you to focus on this for four years."

Cole did, recording and selling rap albums and mix tapes to help pay for school and posting perfect grades for five straight semesters. He graduated from Wayne State in 2005 with a business degree, but found himself working for \$7 an hour at Target. Once again, he said, he had to work doggedly — interviewing all over Chicago for jobs — before he found his position working for the online arm of Colorado Technical University.

He has put together pieces of his story and motivational guidance in a self-published book, "Athletes & Emcees" — available at jcolebooks.com — and hopes to convince more kids with similar backgrounds that the barriers between them and their dreams do not have to keep them from success.

"You gotta look at this as a detour, not a derailment," Cole said. "You may have to go around, but you're still moving, still on your way."