

VARIETY

# Reading saved this ex-con's life

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A.J. Briscoe woke up on Monday, Sept. 29, 2014, to relentless rain. The downpour forced him to cancel a meeting at his favorite coffee shop because his van had broken down the day before. So he worked from the dining room table of his small, impeccably decorated home in north Minneapolis, marveling that weather and car repair were the biggest headaches of this “amazing” day.

Liberation Day.

For the first time in 22 years — since Briscoe was 14 years old — the former Vice Lord and five-time felon was free of any kind of state supervision. Twenty-two years of reporting his daily actions, of submitting to unannounced visits, of living only where other people said he could were over.

Now Briscoe can vote for the first time. Leave the state without asking permission. Fully pursue his dream to become an entrepreneur and literacy advocate for young people of color, to stop them from being sucked down the intoxicating pipeline that entrapped him.

The reality thrills him — and keeps him awake at night.

“I’ve been struggling to stay optimistic, to stay encouraged,” said Briscoe, married and the father of a 5-year-old son with whom he is working to rebuild a relationship.

Being scrutinized for nearly two-thirds of his life has forced Briscoe to regularly face his bad decisions, such as dropping out of school in the seventh grade and transforming from a straight-A student to a flush drug dealer in 32 states who was shot twice and spent more than 10 years behind bars. You don’t shift on a dime after that.

“It’s like washing your car,” he said of shedding his past. “It still has the residue on it.”

He’s frank, too, that after having been an illicit one-percenter for so long, it’s hard to struggle financially, to not yet be able to support his family through legitimate channels. His probation officer, Kim Peterson, believes in him, but she doesn’t sugarcoat the challenges ahead.

“Kim told me, ‘You can’t do anything related to your past life, because you’ll destroy people’s faith and hope that people can change.’”

He repeats her words like a mantra, louder this time. “ ‘People can CHANGE!’ She put so much pressure on me by being so insightful. But, man, I accepted the challenge.”

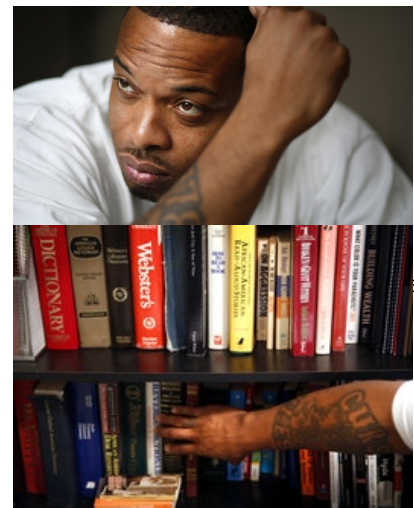
Albert Joseph Briscoe III attended grade school in Tennessee, then moved back to Minneapolis with his mother, Debra Haynes, to be closer to his grandmother, who would largely raise him. Charlene and her husband, Albert Briscoe Sr., were upstanding people with deep Minneapolis roots.

Briscoe was gifted academically and was getting invitations from prestigious magnet schools. “But it wasn’t cool” to be smart, he said, and the lure of the streets was potent. His father, “the black sheep,” was heavily involved in street activity and served time for manslaughter. His mother struggled financially to raise him and his sister, but she guided them with love.

“My perception of what success looked like was the guys coming through the neighborhood with new cars, with jewels,” Briscoe said. “I was infatuated with what I saw: hustlers and pimps and gangbangers. Corporate America? That was more intimidating.”

## Arrested at 12

At 12, Briscoe was arrested for the first time, stopped with one-fourth of an ounce of crack cocaine, which got him a week of juvenile detention. By 14, he said, he had made \$200,000, stored in safe deposit boxes, from drug sales. “I couldn’t buy anything,” he said, with a wistful laugh, “because I couldn’t drive.”



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Briscoe showed off his collection of dictionaries. “The dictionary is my best friend,” he said. He learned to love reading while in prison.

He told himself that he wasn't hurting anybody by dealing meth, crack, cocaine, weed, Ecstasy and pharmaceuticals. "I wasn't breaking into people's homes. I wasn't stealing money."

His life took on a familiar rhythm. Arrests and indictments, group homes, jails and prisons from here to Tennessee and West Virginia. He's been out on parole just four of the past 18 years, "the extent," he said wryly, "of my vacation."

His grandmother never gave up on him, traveling to visit him and writing him letters encouraging him "to tap into my potential through words." She died in 2012, but not before she sensed a powerful transformation occurring within her beloved grandson.

That transformation had begun years earlier when Briscoe overheard a cellmate "stumbling through the pages of a children's book" while reading to his child. "He was illiterate," said Briscoe. Even though Briscoe had a GED, "I was afraid that, if I did have a child, I'd want to be able to instill in him more than how to sell drugs and open a [car] hood. It haunted me to think about my own son asking me to help him with his homework."

Prison became Briscoe's college. Facing a four-count indictment, he dug into a law book and discovered a procedural error that he presented to his public defender, who presented it to the judge. He got three years on that offense, instead of 60.

"Reading literally saved my life," he said.

From then on, he read everything he could get his hands on, inspired particularly by black businessman and philanthropist Farrah Gray, and J.A. Rogers, a Jamaican-American author who challenged prevailing ideas about race.

### Spreading the word

Briscoe created a prison literacy program in Tennessee called BRAINS (Books Rehabilitating American Inmates National Society), where men contributed \$2 each to update the prison library. Recently, he's turned his focus to a different demographic, the high-risk 12-year-old Briscoes.

"Our communities are losing young men and women to the self-destructive thinking and behavior associated with despair," he writes in his self-published book, "Changing Places." They lack guidance and mentors, he said. "Something has to change."

While still on parole two years ago, Briscoe founded a community literacy initiative called To Succeed You Must Read! The program reaches students in schools and libraries, and includes a summer book club. Last summer, 400 neighbors and friends celebrated the effort with a block party.

Briscoe aims to visit 200 inner-city schools to promote literacy and to get kids to "act on their ideals instead of on fear." It's a huge leap for many.

A few weeks ago, a 21-year-old gang leader sat in Briscoe's living room "expressing his desire to do something else," but seeing no way out. Briscoe and another former gang leader convinced the young man to reject others' vision for himself and create his own. "He went from wanting to kill someone to saying, 'F--- that gangbangin'. I'm going to focus on my music,'" Briscoe said.

"We may have saved a life by utilizing our influence to supplement his negativity with positivity."

### Books and baked goods

It's that determination that has made Sundia Briscoe her husband's greatest champion. The 45-year-old transportation coordinator for Minneapolis' Best Academy Middle School lived in the same neighborhood as the Briscoes and was a longtime friend of Albert's.

"Sundia," he said, "taught me how to love people."

They married five years ago and live in a home filled with stunning African art. Their front porch features a bookshelf stacked with young adult literature free for the taking. And there is plenty of taking, Sundia said with a laugh.

"Every day, in the summer especially, I come home to kids waiting on the stairs. They want to eat, because he's always cooking or baking. They grab a book. They're so excited to just be around him."



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A.J. Briscoe runs his literacy program from his home office in Minneapolis. He says reading "literally saved my life," helping him to figure out...



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Briscoe held one of his booking mug shots, this one from Hennepin County in 2004. His first arrest was at age 12.

Sundia is a close friend of Yarmisha Wallace, the mother of Briscoe's son, Zah'Neire, which means "Light of God." Both women are making room for Briscoe to become more involved in Zah'Neire's life. Father and son go to the park, assemble puzzles and visit family.

"I appreciate that," he said of their patience, acknowledging that he distanced himself from his child early on. "I didn't know how to be a father."

On the Sunday before Liberation Day, Briscoe hosted his first spelling bee at Minneapolis Central Library, with six middle-school participants, and his beaming mom, Debra, in attendance. When his van broke down on his way there, longtime friend and Minneapolis storyteller Myron Green got him there on time.

Green is one of many of Briscoe's mentors, sharing with him their expertise in technology, business, social work, public speaking, spirituality and writing. Another is Tiffini Flynn Forslund, Minnesota director for the voter registration campaign UniteWomen.org. Two weeks ago, she presented Briscoe with a voter registration card and walked him through it.

"He now has the experience and knowledge to go out there on issues that he knows will directly affect people who are trying to do better," she said. "He's completing the changeover with such insight."

These days, Briscoe visits day-care centers to read to the children. He'll host a three-day "Reclaiming Our Role as Men" workshop beginning Oct. 23 ([tosucceedyoumustread.org](http://tosucceedyoumustread.org) (<http://tosucceedyoumustread.org>)). He is beginning to make money from his inspirational talks and self-published books, which focus on the troubling dropout-to-prison pipeline. He's marking milestones in his new life.

"I tell him, 'You're safe now,'" Sundia said. "'You don't have to look over your shoulder.'"

Albert Briscoe just has to believe that — every day.

"I still run into guys who pull on me with their pockets bulging," he said. "They expect me to stay stuck in that world. It's hard, because it's so easy to go back. But nothing is more important to me than attaining what I have through reputable means. I just think about how far I've come."

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Gail Rosenblum covers trends, social issues and the complexities of human relationships. Author of "A Hundred Lives Since Then: Essays on Motherhood, Marriage, Mortality and More."

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