

## TRUTH IN LOVE

### African American Males Face Dilemma of Cool Pose and Toxic Masculinity

By Parris J. Baker  
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*Editor's note: Following is the fifth in a series of articles on violence in Erie, Pennsylvania*

In 1993 while working for Perseus House Inc. as the Director of Programming, I was introduced to an African American adolescent male, age 15. His behavioral problems at the time of placement were extreme aggression, impulsivity, in-school social-emotional and behavioral issues, low academic achievement, drug possession with intent to deliver, and substance abuse. While in the program, treatment staff members recommended terminating him from the program at almost every client progress meeting. He had trouble establishing friendships and following rules. In retrospect, he probably should have been terminated. However, I vetoed every recommendation for termination. Eventually, I became his personal counselor, primarily because no one else believed in his ability to change. Eventually, he did change and successfully graduated from the program.

Upon graduation, we decided to remain in contact. Sharing similar interests in boxing, martial arts, and African American history, we would periodically get together to work out, share a meal and memorable moments. Over the next year, our mentor-mentee relationship strengthened and by all accounts this case could be considered a success. He had not returned to the juvenile correction system and avoided further direct involvement with law enforcement. But he did return to the life of the streets.

I remember telling him, “There is more in you than you know. You have incredible gifts and talents that God can use. You don’t have to return to the streets selling dope.” His response to me with tears in his eyes was, “Mr. Baker, I know you love me, and I love you too, but I’m gonna keep selling drugs, so I’m not gonna live very long. I love everything that comes with selling dope; the money, the women, the respect. I won’t live to be 21! Drug dealers don’t live long lives.” On June 27, 1996, then 19 years old, he was shot and killed.

The impact of his life and death on my life is indelible. Upon learning of his death, I grieved the loss of mentee, and friend, and a “son (The relationship of son was due in part, to the clinical transference I experienced – the loss of my biological son, Brooks Jerome. Brooks died in childbirth on April 29, 1993). I began searching for answers to a seemingly endless stream of questions. Was his prediction of not living to be 21 a self-fulfilling prophecy? Was the deck stacked against him – poor family, impoverished community, and no positive African American adult male role models? What could I have done differently? While reading his obituary, I discovered that he had a son whom he named Parris Francis. Once again, I was overwhelmed with tears.

“I stay cool, and dig all jive,  
That's the way I stay alive.  
My motto,  
as I live and learn,  
is  
Dig and be dug  
In return.”

This short ditty, written by Langston Hughes, presents a dilemma as it attempts to understand violence among urban African American males. The very “cool” mentioned by Hughes, necessary to keep young African American adolescents alive, paradoxically, may also become the pathway to death and destroyed lives.

Referred to as *Cool Pose*,<sup>[1]</sup> authors Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson assert, “For some black males, cool pose represents a fundamental structuring of the psyche – the cool mask belies the rage held in check beneath the surface. For others it is the adoption of a uniquely creative style that serves as a sign of belonging and stature. Black males have learned to use posing and posturing to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style – self. They have developed a “third eye” that reads interpersonal situations with a special acuity. They have cultivated a keen sense of what to say and when to say it, in order to avoid punishment and pain and to embellish their life chances.” (p. 8)

More contemporary literature related to manhood, masculinity, and crime identify the concept of cool pose as toxic masculinity.<sup>[2]</sup> The label of toxic masculinity (coined by Shepherd Bliss, 1990) was assigned first to men who felt

the constant need to prove their manhood due to inadequate and unhealthy father-son relationships. The definition then shifted to include marginalized men who were inclined to value street subcultural definitions of masculinity, such as personal, expensive possessions, the ability to protect and preserve one's self and self-image from physical harm and to present self-reliance, overt confidence, and death-defiance. Toxic masculinity is associated with anti-feminism, misogyny, and homophobia.

What I have learned in the 26 years since my young friend's murder is that youth violence, particularly in African American communities, is and remains a significant public health problem. The age of both the victims and the offenders is getting younger. Though developmentally still in early adolescence, where role experimentation is expected and quite normal, my friend had a fixed answer to the ubiquitous question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" A drug dealer, and dead, were his answers. My intervention efforts with a 15-year-old African American adolescent were too late.

In subsequent essays I will share additional narratives from residents who have experienced and survived personal loss and recurrent trauma due to community violence. I will also address potential covariates such as social and environmental injustice, father absence, Afrocentrism, Critical Race Theory and education curricula design, and the concepts of identity, hope, self-efficacy, and resilience, with urban youth violence in black communities. Finally, I hope to share ways to decrease the premature death of so many African American youth, male and female. I invite you to share your suggestions, thoughts, and perspectives on this important and complicated topic.

1. Majors, R. & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose. The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books.
2. In Carol Harrington. (2021). What is "Toxic Masculinity" and Why Does it Matter? Retrieved [here](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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