I was 5 when my father taught me the art of working for something you don’t have. It was a strategy for remaining out of trouble, perseverance, and eventually, the game of basketball.

“The only way to make it out of here is hittin’ the lotto or bein’ the coldest on the court.” Every time I walk out of my front door I remember these vivid words from my father. With me not being of age to even play the lottery, I knew one way to get out of Harlem.

“Come on you gotta hit five in a row,” scolded my dad as I missed from the baseline. We worked out every day at 5am before he went into work. Just because it was the morning didn’t mean he would take it easy. We did dribbling drills with wrist weights, defensive slide drills, and any type of cardio. To be real, I didn’t like any of the drills that we did, but I did know it would make me closer to my dreams as a ball player.

My dad told us many stories throughout his life so he could help my older sister and me rise above our circumstances. We lived on the south side of Philadelphia. Like most of the other children who played on the raggedy playgrounds, I didn’t think we were poor. We always had a hot meal when it was dinner time, even though I did not always like them.

We lived on Fifth Street, in a cold, clean, three-bedroom apartment that was right across the street from Independence Park that was always filled with energized kids. When the park was closed after hours, you could still hear my basketball bounce on the asphalt as I fantasized imaginary buzzer-beaters in my head. At 1:00, you could count on Ms. Jackson to open her door to yell at me to go back to my house. “Boy you better get outta here with all that noise ‘fore I pop that ball!” I would nod my head and say yes ma’am and get a couple more shots up.
The playground was an unpredictable place for anyone. You didn’t know if you were going to get a good competitive game that would end in giving dap and respect to your opponent, or if there was going to be a big fight because someone thought the other person was fouling too much. If you were considered “soft” you wouldn’t get picked up on a team. You needed an edge or aggression that people saw in your eye in order to step on Independence Park Court. There were times when I wouldn’t leave the court unless I won three games, no matter if my team was tired or not.

Farther down the street was EZ-Check market. If you ever ran out of milk or a necessity to the kitchen I guarantee EZ-Check had it. Every morning before school me and my friend Omar would go there and get two Super donuts to eat. “Uh oh here come the trouble makers,” he would mumble. I would occasionally hassle Mr. Jones about a discount that he rarely gave me but when he did it was much appreciated.

I went to Freedom High School, about 20 minutes away from where I stayed. It was a pretty big school about 300 in my junior class. The majority of my class was heading in the wrong direction though. Many of them did drugs and once every blue moon you would get all 300 in attendance in school. Freedom was a trap if you ask me. If you, yourself did not have the determination to get out of here, there was no one else that would instill that hope into you as well. I’m just lucky enough to have my dad reiterate that to me every day.

It was the end of September, so that means that basketball season was about to start. As good as I thought I was I was not well respected in the basketball world. I was 5’9” and looked undernourished whenever we did shirts versus skins. I did lack height but I made up for it with speed and aggression. I was a quick guard that had heart so I was always a great pick for a team.

In the first week of October everyone awaits the newspaper. Reason being is because it had the top 25 players to watch in the Philadelphia area in the sports section. My dad has been talking about this day since the summer and he is very anxious to see if my hard work has paid off in the newspaper. Omar and I ran into the house and I picked up the newspaper and went into my room before dad came home.

“Do you think you will be in it this year Justice?” He said.
“I for real hope so bro or my dad will go off”
“Yea you know your dad is crazy when it comes to this basketball stuff”
“Yea tell me something I don’t know Omar.”

I unfolded the paper and scurried to the sports section. I read down the list. #1 Andy Wiggins, Shooting Guard. #2 Clay Monford, Center. I kept skimming down the paper. #11 Travis Banner, Small Forward. #12 Monte Willis, Point Guard. Each time I closer to the bottom of the paper, the less hope I attained. #25 Dominique Walls, Power Forward. And there it was, just like that. Another year without going recognized again. I crumbled the paper in my hands and just began to cry softly.

“Justice don’t even worry about it man. I know how good you really are it’s only gonna be a matter of time before everyone does.” I didn’t say a word. I just sat there continuously crying until Omar left. I then went to sleep.

“Wake up boy we got work to do.” my dad bust through the door at 4:00 in the morning. I already knew what this was about. This was probably going to be the hardest work out that I have ever been through. He didn’t even give me time to put on my shoes and then made me run to the park. He had me running for at least 15 minutes and then he called me to half court.

“Justice!”

“Wassup dad?” I said.

“So how you feel about everything man?” he said.

“I can’t say that I agree with everything that happened I know that for sure. All this work that we do out here and I can’t even make the local newspaper.”

“Look man I got something for you.” He pulled out a folded red paper out of his back pocket and gave it to me. “You look me right in my eyes right now and tell me you will do whatever it takes to make it, you gotta promise me. I’m willing to sacrifice my life to see the best for you. I know I’m a hard father, but in the end believe me it will pay off.”

“I promise dad I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

“Alright then, unfold that red paper and read it and tell me what you think.” The paper read “NIKE Elite Youth Basketball is a department dedicated to improving the game
of basketball. EYB offers young players a place to receive superior skill instruction, honest evaluation and life-changing experiences. The programs and events push kids to work hard and to challenge them to be better on and off the court. The first 100 people who submit this by October 15 will be in the Nike Elite Camp for a chance for the country to know your name.”

I was ecstatic when I read this and I just looked up at him and he just smiled. But, I then kept reading. The expenses came up around $500. Where was I going to get the money? I hope dad read this whole paper. And as soon as all of these thoughts crossed my mind, my dad put $550 in my hand and said, “Make ya dad proud now,” and he gave me a hug that sent chills through both of our bodies.

When I went to bed for the rest of the time I had before school, I sat there and pondered how did my father manage to $550 out of nowhere just for me? I said to myself I will wait to figure that out in the morning and I will enjoy the moment for now.

My alarm clock sounded at 7:03 to get ready for school. Mom had pancakes and eggs waiting for in the microwave as well. She too must have heard of the good news. After I finished eating I washed my plate, and began my journey to school. When I stepped out of the door Omar was standing right there waiting on me. I told him about the good news.

“Are you serious man? That’s tight I told you that you would get your time.

“Yea bro and the crazy thing is my dad paid for the whole trip.” He looked at me a little weird after I said that.

“What’s that look for?” I said.

"Where did Jeff get all that money from?"

“That’s the same question I was going to ask you. He had to be saving it up for something special and I guess he felt this was a special time.” I still had no idea where Dad got all that cash, but I could care less, my expenses were already paid for. The money was out of my hands.

We walked into school and went to our lockers to get established for the rest of the day. But, I couldn’t help but notice that literally everyone in the hall way was looking at me funny. It was the same exact look that Omar gave to me this morning. “Omar tell me what’s
going on man why everyone looking at us like this?"

“No Justice, they’re looking at you like that bro."

“Well what’s up what’s going on is it something that somebody isn’t telling me?” I began start panicking a little. And I had a right to after I figured out the news. Omar quietly led me to the lunchroom where the televisions were. And there it was. A picture of my dad on Crime Stoppers. He was charged for robbing a bank and is now on the run. This explains where all that money came from. I was in shock.

I ran out of the lunchroom all the way home. I sat on my bed crying as I grasped my basketball that my dad gave to me. I dried my tears, laced up my shoes, and ran across to the park. I went to the free throw line and I felt myself growing light. Higher and higher, above the rim, over the apartments, until everything was below me disappeared and I was alone.

I closed my eyes and shot the free throw.