

The Daily Helping Episode 296:

Marcus Allen

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:34] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented, and successful people on the planet who follow their passions and strive to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your Daily Helping.

Thanks for tuning into this episode of The Daily Helping Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. And we've got another interview in the Athlete's Voice series of recordings, where we interview exceptional former athletes who are doing even more exceptional things in the world, making it a better place.

Here with us today is Marcus Allen. He is a charismatic and passionate public servant devoted to helping those less fortunate. He's been a visionary leader with more than 20 years experience as a CEO. He's worked tirelessly to improve life circumstances for those who are disadvantaged and has been very successful in this endeavor. He's a sought after speaker. He literally speaks everywhere. And he is in the College Sports Hall of Fame for Paine College. We're going to hear about that because I didn't know a lot about Paine College before I met Marcus. Marcus is great. Marcus is enthusiastic. And, Marcus, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is great to have you here.

Marcus Allen: [00:02:20] Well, Dr. Richard, it is great to be here. And as you already alluded to, I do a lot of speaking, I do a lot of talking. So, I'm glad we're here to talk.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:29] Well, we are going to talk, but what we're going to do first is we're going to get in the Marcus Allen time machine. I'd love to hear what puts you on the path today. Let's talk about your journey.

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Marcus Allen: [00:02:40] Yeah. It's probably interesting to know that when I was growing up, I hated to talk in front of people. I just remember one time I had to talk at school in class, I think I was in middle school - what do you call it a cotton mouth? I could not get the words out. So, to be known as a speaker is pretty amazing.

When I look back on where I came from - and speaking of where I came from, I think you heard me share my story earlier today about growing up in poverty. And when I was born, having some health challenges with my legs, and the doctor telling my mom that I would never play sports or walk properly because she couldn't afford to get a surgery that I needed to get done.

And we were homeless, didn't have health insurance. And so, for one of your colleagues to tell my mom that her son wouldn't have the opportunity and access that other kids would have only because of her current circumstances of not having money.

Fast forward, living in the projects, living in abject poverty, I went through a number of challenges. And then, met a mentor at 12 years old who was a police officer, a black man in my small town of Thompson, Georgia, who said to me, "Marcus, you don't have to be the most talented, the smartest, the most athletic. You just have to outwork everybody. There is nothing preventing you from outworking the next person." And that planted a seed in my mind and in my heart that I still try to live up to, to this day.

And what that meant for me was, I had to hit the weight room more than other kids consistently at 13 years old. I had to be out shooting basketball and doing all this stuff, training more than my friends. I wasn't as tall as I am today, and so I needed to work harder. By the time I got to my senior year of high school, I had grown five inches since my freshman year of high school, I was 6'7".

And that hard work that he had instilled in me at 13 years old started to pay off, and I got a scholarship to go to Augusta, Georgia, playing college in Augusta, Georgia, small HBCU. Continued to work hard. Ended up leaving there. Got an opportunity to go to the Denver Nuggets, and wasn't there long. I got injured. And then, when I did my rehab, I tried to get back to an NBA by playing overseas. I ended up playing in Sweden two years, Finland two years, Israel, Argentina. And it just wasn't meant for me to get back

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to the NBA.

But I just felt that my journey was one that other kids - not just kids - other people could probably learn something from. When the world counts you out day one on your birthday, your actual birthday, and says, "Here are the things you won't be able to do," my mom and I proved that doctor wrong.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:06:04] You know, you mentioned he was my colleague, I take no ownership for that guy. But in all seriousness, it's interesting, there's been kind of a theme with some of these athletes that I've spoken to in this series, and that is it was sports first. Sports was the driving thing. Sports was the the mission, the purpose. But that sports went away. You had a very short NBA career. You weren't able to get back to the NBA. Talk to us about that transition.

Marcus Allen: [00:06:36] That's a great question. I talked to some younger former athletes about this today. When I played, I never took it for granted when I was playing. And I always had this thing in the back of my mind that's saying, "Marcus, keep your feet on solid ground. Don't get caught up in how great people tell you, or don't get caught up in when you go into the court thousands of people applauding you and cheering your name. Don't get caught up in that." I was very clear on that, even from starting in college.

Then, that day came when I had to hang up my shoes, basketball shoes, so to speak, and I had to get a job. And then, reality hit. And I think for at least maybe the first year, maybe two years, when I look back on it, I went through a slight depression. And I was like in search of this void that I didn't have a name for. There was something that was missing that affected my soul and that I was in need of finding. And I didn't know how to deal with it.

And then, I talked to a friend of mine, a woman from Canada, Native American from Canada, who played on the Canadian National Basketball Team. And we met while doing some work on a Native American reservation. And she called me one day - we had been friends for some time - and she said, "Marcus, remember that void we were both talking about? I filled my void." And I said, "What is it?"

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And she was in medical school at the time - I'm still talking about doctors. And she said she was sitting, and the doctor who was kind of the lead person that was helping her do her residency comes in and says, "Hey, Karen. I need you. I need you." And she's like, "What?" And then, in comes this patient on this gurney, and the patient has a pipe that's going from the front of the chest and sticking out of his back. And she said, "Marcus, the adrenaline that started to flow in my body was very similar to the adrenaline that would flow when I would get in a basketball game and be going against one of my best competitors. And I found that surgery and helping people and healing people fill that void for me."

And today, I'll say for me, I'm doing the same thing in a different way. I believe I have a talent of helping young people to reveal what they want to do and giving them access to doing it by putting caring, compassionate adults or mentors in their life through Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:41] When we find our passion, it's like a lightning bolt that hits us, right? It's like this energy. It's like a download. Like, everything you're supposed to do becomes really clear. So, I know you're doing this work with Big Brothers Big Sisters. Share with us a couple of stories, if you will, about some things that you've observed. I want to know specifically - because you're in the Philly area - some of the things you're doing in Philly and some of the stories around that.

Marcus Allen: [00:10:12] So, yeah, I've been the CEO for Big Brothers Big Sisters since 2013. When I came in, I was the first African-American to hold that role in its 106 year history. And the challenge for me was the fact that we serve 80 percent, more or less, kids of color. Yet, we had never had a leader of color. And there's something to be said about, you know, representation matters. We say we want to help these kids achieve a higher form or a higher version of themselves, but we don't give them anything to actually aspire to.

It's like, "Well, how can you tell me you want me to do something but I don't see anybody that looks like me in the roles and in the stuff that you're telling me that's achievable for me?" And so, I think that's important. It's not about me. But it is important that our kids see people who look like them doing the stuff that we're telling them that they can do, and not just play sports, not just play basketball, not just be a rapper.

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I am a big a mentor for a young kid, Nassir, in Philadelphia. And he's right in the heart of North Philadelphia, which is a tough part of Philadelphia. For those who don't know, Philadelphia, by probably all measures of the phrase, is the murder capital of the United States. Last year, we had 561 gun violence murders in Philadelphia. And this year, we're on target to either meet or exceed that number. So, it gives you just a little bit of idea of what youth like Nassir and others are facing.

And Nassir was being raised by his grandmother when I came into his life. And his father was in jail at the time. And this was five years ago. And Nassir was a really quiet young man, but you could tell, very intuitive, smart, kind, just a good heart. And then, his grandmother reminded me of my mom. His grandmother was committed to making sure nothing happened to her grandson and that he was not going to go down the path that his father went down and so many other black men.

Then, a couple of years passed, his father gets out of jail. I get a chance to meet his father. And so, his father and I have a good relationship. And then, Nassir started going through some challenges. He got beat up by some bullies in school, and I was there for him during that, as well as his grandmother, father, and others.

And then, during the pandemic, one of the most tragic things in his young life happened, his father died. And he looked up to his father. He looks just like his father. He wanted to be just like his father. And so, as his mentor, I knew my job was just to be there, just to be there for him, just to be there for his grandmother, for his relatives.

And this idea of meeting people, the last thing you want to do is meet emotion with logic. And I wanted to meet their emotion with emotion, and show them that, you know, my heart hurt for them. And I think that deep in our relationship, and I like to think that that interaction with Nassir, has had some impact on his life today.

Nassir is a freshman at La Salle University. He's making all A's. And by all indicators, it looks like he's on track to do what he needs to do to graduate from college and go on to be a productive citizen in this country. But that's not without all the obstacles and challenges that he's faced. And that's not to say that he's not going to face even more obstacles and challenges before he can even graduate from college. But he is on the

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right path.

And he is not much different than many of the other kids that go through challenges in Philadelphia and across the country. Many of those kids, they just need somebody to take an interest in them. But not only take an interest in them, to help give them access and social capital to those things that they normally won't have access to. And I think that's one of the things that I do for Nassir.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:14:38] I love that. And just a little personal plug here for Big Brothers Big Sisters, actually a big part of my story is that I mentored a young man who is an at risk youth, a seventh grader. And that experience was really the thing that pushed me towards going to graduate school. And so, I don't think I would have done it had I not had the experience of a mentor. So, if you have the time to volunteer and do something, there are few things more meaningful than mentoring a youth. So, I just wanted to commend you for that and the work that you're doing there.

I wanted to circle back, if we could, Marcus, to the gun violence. And we were talking about that a bit over lunch. There was a story that you shared with the group, I'd love for you to share it with everybody who's listening to this about the work you're doing in that space.

Marcus Allen: [00:15:33] Yeah. So, some would say Big Brothers Big Sisters is about one-to-one mentoring, and what does that have to do with gun violence, and what's happening in Philadelphia. And I would say, it has a lot to do with it. Because I guarantee you, if you talk to many people who have committed these sorts of heinous acts, they can pinpoint where they made the wrong decision and went down the wrong road.

And sometimes it just takes one person to intercede that could stop something tragic from happening by giving that young person just some advice or just giving that young person some time and listen to them.

And what I was sharing with you and the group of people that we were talking to at lunch was, Big Brothers Big Sisters and myself, we are about to form a partnership with something called Save Guns Coalition in Philadelphia, to address all the killing that's

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happening in Philadelphia. And this is a group of leaders from other nonprofits, from civic space, from corporate space, from foundations, philanthropy coming together using evidence-based strategies to decrease the amount of lives that are lost to gun violence.

And one of the people that I had heard from - and we're going to be implementing some of his healing center strategies out of Oakland, California - Dr. Ginwright, he shared a story that really resonated with me and sounded very similar to some stuff that I've had to do. And he was talking about he had a center in Oakland and he was working with this group of young people, young adults who were involved in a lot of stuff in the streets selling drugs, gang banging, the whole nine.

And he had shared with the group of young men, "Hey, I know this is tough and I know you're not going to be perfect." But as a part of the strategy of trying to end gun violence, he had told them, "If you find yourself needing to do something to protect yourself, to retaliate, or any of that stuff, let's make a commitment that you would call me before you go out and do anything. That's all I'm asking. Just give me a call." And all the young men agreed to do that.

So, one night, one young person who Dr. Ginwright had formed a really strong relationship with, who was a known drug dealer in the streets, someone close to him got killed. And he and his boys knew who did it or thought they knew who did it, so they were going to go and retaliate on this person. And as they were headed to the car to go and do whatever they were going to do, he remembered, "Hey, we made a commitment that we're going to call Ginwright and let him know what we're going to do before we do it." And they said, "Man, come on. We got to go." He said, "No, we got to do this. We got to follow through."

And so, he goes and calls him. It's like 1:00, 2:00 in the morning, Dr. Ginwright answers the phone and said, "Hey, what's going on?" He's like, "You know, so and so killed my boy. We know where he's at. We got his address. We're about to go and take care of this." And Dr. Ginwright was like, "Okay. Hold on a second. Hold on. Let me put my shoes on. I'll tell you what, why don't I meet you at the corner of whatever block before you guys go there, because it's on the way." And he's like, "All right. Cool. We'll meet you there."

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And so, he meets them at the corner block that he wanted to meet them on. There's a pizza shop, and he meets a group of guys at the pizza shop, orders pizza, and sits down and talks to the guys. By the time they were done eating pizza, they no longer want to go and kill this other guy.

And the impact of that is that same former drug dealer, today - this is 10, 15 years later - is now married with two kids. And he's the chief of the fire department.

And so, one of the things that we know from both the work of Dr. Ginwright and the work that we're doing at Big Brothers Big Sisters and in Philadelphia, is, young folks, they need to know that someone cares about them, this idea of love, this idea of caring and compassion. Understanding that we shouldn't always judge a person based on who they are and what they've done. We also have to look at the entire environment that surrounds that person and that's perpetuating these circumstances that we find ourselves in.

And so, that's the type of work that we're going to be investing in and involving ourselves in, because that's the stuff that's more immediate and urgent that's negatively impacting our communities.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:20:39] And not just Philadelphia, but everywhere.

Marcus Allen: [00:20:41] Everywhere.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:20:42] Everywhere.

Marcus Allen: [00:20:43] And not just urban areas. It's in rural areas now, in suburban. It is a major issue across the country.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:20:51] So, tell us a little bit about how people can get involved.

Marcus Allen: [00:20:56] So, Big Brothers Big Sisters, we're a national organization. The organization I run is in Philadelphia, in South Jersey. If people want to follow us and

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get involved in our work and support our work, you can find us online at independencebigs.org, that's I-N-D-E-P-E-N-D-E-N-C-E, bigs, B-I-G-S, dot org. Or you can also follow me on both LinkedIn, Marcus Allen, and Facebook, Marcus Allen.

Because we are going to continue to do just different things to help our community. One of the things - if you don't mind, Dr. Richard, I'll just say real quickly - me and about 20 courageous, brave souls are going to be climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa December 1st through the 8th. We have a fundraising strategy to raise a-half-a-million dollars to take kids who are waiting for a Big on our waiting list, making sure that every kid gets a a mentor, a caring, compassionate adult. Our motto is, "Every kid should have a mentor, should graduate from high school with a mentor for life."

And so, it costs money to do that. And we know that the cost of not doing that is far greater than what it costs us to put mentors and support mentors in these kid's lives. So, we're going to Africa, Kilimanjaro. And for us, it's symbolic because Kilimanjaro is one of seven summits in the world, and it is not an easy thing to do. And this is only a small example of what our kids have to overcome and climb in their lives. And theirs is more life changing, life saving. What we're doing is a small token or a tip of the hat to those young people, to those people in the community who are climbing their own mountains each and everyday.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:58] Beautifully said. Marcus. I've so enjoyed our conversation today. I like to wrap up every episode by asking my guests just this one thing, what is your biggest helping, the one most important piece of information you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today?

Marcus Allen: [00:23:17] I think if there's one thing that I want people to walk away with today, it would be grace. It would be the fact that none of us are perfect. That we live in a world that we're so quick to cancel folks or to criticize. It's so easy to write people off for the smallest of things. Our young people need people to believe in them in spite of. We have to give them grace, the same grace that was given to us.

If any of us was judged, if it came to light our worst day, if it came to light to the whole world, we would be embarrassed. And a lot of people wouldn't mess with us because they saw something that we did in our past. And I'm asking and I'm hoping, we don't let

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ourselves shrink to the least of ourselves. Meaning, it's so easy to criticize folks and to disown them and try to bring people down.

I want people to build people up. You know, let's think about how we are redemptive. That all of us deserves a second chance. And some of us deserve a third, fourth, and fifth chance. And I think that is something that I hope resonates with people because, otherwise, I don't know how we are going to get ourselves out of these challenges that we're facing today.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:25:12] So well said. Grace.

Marcus Allen: [00:25:15] Grace.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:25:16] Grace. I love it. Marcus, give us the URL one more time.

Marcus Allen: [00:25:20] independencebig.org. Independencebig is plural, dot org.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:25:25] Perfect. And we'll have that as well in the show notes at thedailyhelping.com. Marcus, I love the work you're doing in the world. Thank you so much for coming on The Daily Helping and sharing with us today.

Marcus Allen: [00:25:36] Dr. Richard, thank you for having me. Thank you to your listening audience at The Daily Helping. I really appreciate this time. You're really awesome and you're having major impact in many communities. So, thank you for this opportunity.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:25:50] Absolutely. And thank you as well to each and every one of you who took time out of your busy day to listen to the conversation Marcus and I had today. If you liked what you heard, go give us a follow on Apple Podcasts, and leave us a five star review because that is what helps other people find the show. But most importantly, go out there today and do something nice for somebody else. Post it in your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDailyHelping, because the happiest people are those that help others.