



United Way of Greater Houston

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## Meet Ralston

Growing up in Houston's Fifth Ward, it would be easy to drop out of school, get involved with drugs or join a gang. After all, as a Black male born to a single mother in one of Houston's most economically-distressed neighborhoods, Ralston was considered at-risk from birth.

But for Ralston, easy was never an option. When he entered middle school, Ralston joined a United Way enrichment, character development, and academic support program. There, he found an alternative to the path taken by too many young men in his neighborhood.

Instead of hanging out on the streets of the Fifth Ward, Ralston was at a community center learning how to be a better student and a better man. Having mentors who know first-hand the challenges Ralston and other young men like him face, made Ralston feel understood and able to seek advice and help.

"It helped me to stand up for myself, become independent, become a leader and not a follower," said Ralston. "It has helped me stay on top of my goals."

With help from his mentors, Ralston focused on school, made time for community service and set goals for himself. When things got tough, his mentors and the United Way program he was part of were there to make sure Ralston didn't give up or veer off track. They helped Ralston think beyond what he knew, secure a job to help his family, and internships to help him prepare for the future. They made sure college was always on Ralston's mind and that he knew how to apply, gather references, and seek financial aid.

"This program teaches us about leadership and developing a positive character and making sure that we stay in this mature state of mind because we do not want to be on the streets when we get older, said Ralston. "We do not want to still be making minimum wage. We want to have our own business or be a lawyer – things like that."

Ralston graduated high school with a 3.1 GPA and a college acceptance letter. Though he'll be busy with college classes, Ralston will serve as a mentor to other young men. He'll show them what United Way and some excellent mentors showed him: that the future starts with big dreams.