

Almost a year ago today, I was fired from Best Buy. I had been there almost three years, but I stopped putting in the effort. I was a college dropout, and I didn't have a next step.

My manager handed me my last paycheck. I walked out of the store, to the bus stop, wearing that Best Buy uniform I no longer needed. Then I called my sister. She asked, "What's your plan?" I had no answer. Should I look for another job or give school another try? School and work were my main priorities, but I had no way of completing them both. Financial struggles were something all too familiar to my family. I was determined to break that trend, but I was out of school, out of work, out of hope.

A few days later, doing my routine Facebook browse, I saw my good friend, Jose Castillo, tagged in a photo album titled "Graduation." I saw him accepting his Year Up diploma, holding his son on stage. He was appreciative when I congratulated him, but used the conversation to push me to enroll at Year Up.

So I came to my Year Up interview wearing all black, high-top Converse sneakers. Rob Fladger quickly looks down and says, "Hmm, those don't work." Now I knew that before I came in, but the last time I wore dress shoes was prom in 2007. Right after the interview, I went and bought brown dress shoes from Payless, for the low price of \$15. Due to lack of options, I wore them for three months straight, until I finally bought another pair.

Clothing wasn't the only change I had to make. As a student, I was the guy who showed up late, who sat in the back row of all my classes, who turned in homework done on crumpled pieces of paper pulled from my pocket. I never wanted to be there; I was the first one out the door when class ended. No one had high expectations for me. People gave up on me. I gave up on me. I felt like I was living a Jay-Z song. I hustled out of a sense of hopelessness, sort of a desperation. Through that desperation, I became addicted to the feeling of having nothing. That's when I came to Year Up.

Then I had a conversation with my Year Up advisor, Kelly Exley-Smith. I told her, "Year Up is something I can't fail at. I literally have nothing else." She responded, "In Year Up, you get back what you put in." Something must have resonated in me during that conversation. My next step had to be big. The depression of recent

failure was replaced by motivation to succeed. I chose to rededicate myself as a student. So I got to school 45 minutes early every day and typed out all my assignments even when handwritten was acceptable. I became addicted to success.

With the support of the Year Up staff, my fellow classmates and my coworkers at WilmerHale, I was transformed. This year I lost my old self, and found my key to success at Year Up. Today I stand before you, wearing these brand new, jet-black Calvin Klein shoes, one week from the anniversary of my termination at Best Buy. I am confident. I am a new man today.

I want to thank all of you. My relationships built here will define my immediate future. I will build my career in Information Technology and return to school for a degree in Computer Science. I am ready to accomplish any goal I lay out for myself; I can thank Year Up for that.

Incredibly, many people don't know Year Up. However, I know the same way Jose helped me, we can help others who have lost their way. Therefore it is our responsibility, as witnesses, to speak up. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Year Up matters. Thank you.