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SPORTS

‘Do I deserve this?’ After doubt and depression, NBA star Carmelo Anthony of Baltimore is finding the answers

By Ryan McFadden

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A black SUV pulled up in front of a youth detention center in Northeast Washington on a hot August afternoon. NBA veteran Carmelo Anthony hopped out of the car, wearing a hoodie, sweatpants and a crisp pair of Nike Air Force 1s. It was the entrance of a future Hall of Famer, but Anthony carried himself in a way that would make you feel as if you’ve known him your whole life.

He walked through the glass doors before passing through a metal detector and then cramming into a small elevator that took him up to the Youth Services Center gym, where tables and chairs were set up on the court. Moments later, his audience — a group of 16- and 17-year-old incarcerated boys — entered the room. Their eyes grew big as they took in the presence of a worldwide superstar and a member of the NBA’s 75th Anniversary Team.

The kids were a part of the Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, a nonprofit organization that works with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youths and adults. After reading Anthony’s memoir, “Where Tomorrows Aren’t Promised,” which was co-written with bestselling

Baltimore author D. Watkins and published last year, they were going to have a discussion with the former first-round pick.

Anthony, 38, leaned slightly back in his chair and began detailing his life in Baltimore, when he had to watch his back and was afraid to express himself. For a moment, it felt like his 10 All-Star appearances and 2012-13 NBA scoring title hadn't happened yet.

"I've been in your shoes before," he told them. "I've come from where y'all come from. I've walked the same pavement."

For years, Anthony has not felt comfortable talking about his childhood in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and the former Murphy Homes in West Baltimore. But as he approaches his 20th season in the NBA, Anthony's ready to tell his story.

"It's a sigh of relief," he said. "[There] was so much that I kept bundled up, thinking I was doing the right thing by masking my emotions and not letting anyone know how I feel. I dealt with that for so long."



NBA star Carmelo Anthony speaks Aug. 5, 2022, to a group of incarcerated teens at the Youth Service Center, the detention center run by the District of Columbia's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. (courtesy of DYRS)

Anthony's career is something many young hoopsters only dream of. After becoming an elite high school prospect at the former Towson Catholic and at Oak Hill Academy in Virginia, Anthony led Syracuse to a national title as a freshman. He was selected third overall by the Denver Nuggets in the 2003 NBA draft, becoming part of one of the best classes in league history along with LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh.

Anthony was a dominant player in Denver, playing with Marcus Camby, Kenyon Martin and Allen Iverson before joining the New York Knicks and starring at Madison Square Garden for seven seasons. After his tenure with the Knicks, Anthony played for the Oklahoma City Thunder, the Houston Rockets, the Portland Trail Blazers and, most recently, the Los Angeles Lakers, climbing to ninth on the league's all-time scoring list.

Amid the 50-point nights and clutch moments that will be talked about long after his career ends, Anthony would ask himself why he was chosen to make it out of Baltimore, where he once earned money as a squeegee worker.

“OK, I made it ... I'm here, so stop questioning yourself,” he said. “But then something would happen and I would be like, ‘Why me?’ Now I'm back at that mentality, which I worked hard to get away from. The minute someone says something, I'm like, ‘Damn, do I deserve this? Is this really happening to me?’ I try to alleviate as much of that now, but it's hard.”

Anthony's early life was a struggle. Growing up in public housing in West Baltimore, he grew accustomed to losing friends and loved ones, cars lining up on his block monthly for funerals, and dribbling a basketball on bloodstained concrete. Anthony said Baltimore had a different type of coldness where violence, pain and murder were part of the city's makeup.

Towson Catholic, which he attended for three years, became his way to escape the streets. But it was a challenge to be himself there. As one of few minorities at the school, Anthony said his braids were considered a breach of school rules. Meanwhile, he had to deal with the worries of life in a housing project, something his classmates didn't face. “I wanted to be me,” Anthony said. “I wanted to do what was best for me and the school didn't understand that.”

He never knew how to talk about his pain, leading to lonely nights, as he had nowhere to go to express his feelings and emotions. Anthony said depression wasn't discussed in his community, which is why he praises today's world for being more open about mental health. “I [couldn't] go to nobody and be like,

‘I’m depressed,’” he said. “They [would] be like, ‘Man, get out of here. Nobody is trying to hear that.’”



NBA star Carmelo Anthony discussed his memoir, "Where Tomorrows Aren't Promised," during a book signing Aug. 6, 2022, at The Garage at R House in Baltimore. (Steve Jenkins)

The therapy Anthony longed for came two decades later when he started writing. He didn't realize all the things he kept hidden, but once he put pen to paper, he couldn't stop. He felt a sense of relief reliving the stories of the past and wanted to show the world where he came from.

At the Youth Services Center on Aug. 5, Anthony's conversation with the teens shifted from life in the hood to his career. They jokingly asked him about his stint with the Lakers, what happened to Russell Westbrook last season and playing against NBA champion and two-time Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Anthony's neighborhood never presented hope for a life in the NBA, yet he's on the verge of becoming the ninth player in league history to play at least 20 seasons, joining Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Kevin Garnett, Vince Carter, Dirk Nowitzki, Jamal Crawford, Robert Parish, Kevin Willis and the late Kobe Bryant.

Throughout his time in the NBA and competing in three Olympics, there was a sense of validation playing in front of soldout arenas and millions more on television and seeing fans across the globe wear his jersey. All Anthony wanted growing up was someone to validate what he was doing. The NBA provided that.

"You wanted to come outside with something fresh, and somebody be like, 'Yo, that looks fly.' We wanted that validation. The hood looks for that validation," he said. "When I started seeing people with the jerseys, it was like, 'Hey, I'm here.'"

Anthony briefly talked to the teens about some of his transgressions, too. When a DVD titled "Stop Snitching" surfaced in 2004 in Baltimore, celebrating witness intimidation, it included a cameo by Anthony, though he didn't respond to any of the comments about violence. The star and co-producer of the videos was [sentenced to nearly 20 years in federal prison](#) in 2010. Anthony told the teens about the public criticism he faced because of the video and having to admit the mistake he made. "I kept that mentality and it followed me to the NBA," he explained. "I man up and owned that, and now everything else is water under the bridge."



NBA star Carmelo Anthony sits courtside Aug. 7, 2022, during The City is Mine Basketball Classic at St. Frances Academy in Baltimore. (Steve Jenkins)

Anthony understands his influence and wants his legacy to transcend basketball. Last year, he was named [the NBA's inaugural Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Social Justice Champion](#) for his advocacy for criminal justice reform and equality.

“It’s powerful,” said 43-year-old Michael “Mustafa” Plummer, who is a mentor for the Free Minds program. “This is someone who made it out of the ghetto. To come into this space speaks volumes about his character. They can look up to him and emulate the same stance that he took.”

During his trips home, Anthony enjoys seeing close friends and the kids of people he grew up with, marveling at the growth of future generations. But more importantly, Baltimore keeps him humble. As he rides around the city and sees squeegee workers, he reflects on the days he had to wash

windshields to make ends meet. “I understand where they are at mentally and emotionally,” he said.

He also thinks about the future of Baltimore. He wants to help bring communities together through the creation of recreation centers, after-school and job placement programs.

Last year, the Carmelo Anthony Foundation he founded more than 15 years ago launched a “Play it Forward” campaign to raise money to expand its elementary/middle school boys and middle/high school girls programs, launch STEAM-based (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) and basketball enrichment out-of-school programs for Baltimore public school students, and develop a new recreational athletic facility.

During an Aug. 6 fundraiser, Baltimore City Council President Nick Mosby awarded Anthony a citation for his leadership and philanthropic efforts. The foundation raised over \$25,000 at the event toward its goal of \$250,000.

“They are knocking communities down,” said Anthony, whose former residence in the Murphy Homes was demolished in 1999. “We [have] to start implementing [recreation] centers and after-school programs where you can help new writers and they can come in and focus on writing. There [are] people in jail [and] all they do is write books, but their books will never see the light of day. Programs like that are what I’m starting to work on, where we tap into the jails and literary programs.”

As Anthony’s time at the Youth Services Center wrapped up, he sat back and listened to the kids’ poems about living in an apartment with no lights, losing people and becoming a better person. He stood and walked over to the group of teens as they cheered and shook his hand.

“I want people to know I’m never going to stop. I’m never going to stop caring for my people and my community. I’m never going to stop being who I am,” he said.