

Meet Comm Studies alum DJ Brookter: Footballer, life scholar, influencer

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Director of large nonprofit and member of San Francisco Police Commission credits his mentors, even those he didn't particularly like

DionJay Brookter knows enough to wonder: How do we know what we don't know — if we don't know?

He didn't know, for instance, that he needed a credit history to even rent an apartment. He didn't understand that student athletes are, well, students. (Brookter learned this truth in a particularly painful episode that still makes him cringe.) And he didn't know what the heck to do after four years of college and earning a degree.

But, what's compelling and refreshing about this 36-year-old nonprofit director, who came to Utah State University as a football recruit and left as a Communication Studies grad, is that he's always searching for what he doesn't know. His personal resolve is to turn any unknown into an insight.

Oh, and there was one other thing he didn't know, perhaps the one thing that has changed every aspect of his life. He didn't know that people believed in him.

"You don't know what you don't know. That's one of my biggest things."

Brookter graduated in 2006 with a major in Communication Studies, but zero idea of what to do with it. So he stepped onto that career path — marked by switchbacks, potholes and misleading signs — well trod by grads. A dozen years later, Brookter has found a destination of sorts. He is executive director of Young Community Developers,

a San Francisco-based nonprofit with a staff of about 70 and a budget of nearly \$3 million. YCD provides jobs training and mentoring to at-risk people from the underserved, disenfranchised communities of San Francisco's Southeast region, particularly Bayview and Hunters Point neighborhoods.

Each of Brookter's days is unscripted, but you may find him talking with a teenager who's in trouble with the law. Or he might be straightening his tie for public speeches, meeting with school board members and prospective employers, or writing grants for any of the dozens of programs he oversees. His Wednesdays are taken up with his duties as a member of the San Francisco Police Commission.

So when Brookter visited the USU campus in April to participate in the Alumni Lunch Series in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, he hoped to provide students with a few detours on that trail of trials to finding purpose in life.

Brookter's presentation concluded the 2018-19 calendar of the Alumni Lunch Series, which invites former CHaSS graduates — some 38 individuals this season, in a variety of professions — to sit down at a lunch table with students.

Brookter was greeted by a full room of students, many of them majoring in Criminal Justice. Later, during a tour, he admired the Laub Athletics-Academics Complex, unfortunately completed a couple of years after he graduated.

Brookter looks back at that distracted and directionless youth who in 2002 arrived at USU on a full-ride football scholarship. With 80 new best friends, all wearing athletic sweats, his plan was to "play and socialize," he says. "I did that very, very well."

Now, talking with students, he makes a legit presence in a suit and casual shirt, and he's gracious and animated as he bends in to listen to questions.

But there's no football chitchat. Brookter wants instead to talk about his favorite initiatives as a mentor to at-risk youth (for example, teaching street cops how to get to a first-name basis with local kids) and as a voice on the San Francisco Police Commission. (Here, he's working to make space for millennials on the force, bucking the entrenched system of promoting old timers. Millennials, he says, "think so differently. They're innovative and they utilize technology for things I wouldn't even think of doing. We need to work with them and empower them.")

As a child, DionJay Brookter — or DJ as he's known — had two personas: The boy who played night games with neighborhood kids in his Fresno, Calif., neighborhood, and the boy who climbed aboard a bus to make the 45-minute ride to a school on the other side of town in a largely Caucasian neighborhood.

"I lived these two lives," he says now. "And most of the people I went to school with didn't know where I lived, where I grew up."

He acquired lasting lessons in interacting with different types of people. For example, the skill of code switching, as it's known in Communication Studies. This is the ability to talk with a young football player and Chamber of Commerce influencers with equal ease and clarity.

The non-neighborhood school, he says now, "helped me progress." But the benefits the high-schooler gained were eroded when his mother died. With his mom gone and his dad working two jobs, "I was at a juncture in space and place in life where I could either go left or go right," he said.

He did show up at school each day, but he considered it largely a nuisance that kept him from friends — and the locker room. Then, when he was a junior, an unyielding counselor put him, despite protests, in Advanced Placement English. Homework was annoying, and he had no buddies. So he did just what he told the counselor he'd do: He failed

Brookter's high school years were busy with trawling football recruiters from all the big name California universities, and the promises worked. He went back to the same counselor. "Yo, you need to take me out of this class," he remembers telling her. "I need to pass in order to get to college." She responded: "I know you do."

He failed the next quarter, too.

But sitting in AP English one day, he realized he "might as well" just pass the class, clearing the path to college football.

(Although thanking the counselor wasn't his first thought at the time, he's now grateful for a mentor he "actively disliked.")

Then the unimaginable happened: He broke his hand, and it had to be wired back into functionality.

Suddenly, the college offers dwindled to just two: USU and Idaho State. He showed up for training in Logan early the next fall.

Life in college ran along the same track it did in high school. He was having a great time, but his grades as a freshman and sophomore fumbled. But the day Brookter was pulled into an advisor's office, he learned the unflinching truth. He still remembers the advisor's words: "If you get one more F, you're going to be kicked out of the university, and you're going to have to pay back the money we spent for you to be here."

"I didn't understand that until that conversation. I just didn't have the concept of what it meant to have a full-ride scholarship and what it meant to be a student athlete," Brookter remembers. "I had to kick it into gear."

His new efforts included volunteering with Student Athlete Mentors, a program that paired him with incoming freshmen "to help them bridge the gap of coming out of high school and being a student athlete," he said. Although, "I had to learn that myself," he adds.

Following his last fall game as a senior, Brookter took a job at a Logan call center, where he was assigned to contact people on the anniversary of their mortgages and ask if they'd like to refinance.

One thing led to another, or, as Brookter likes to say, "fast forwarded," and he was back in California, where his newfound mortgage knowledge snagged him a job with a national mortgage provider.

But while mortgages are one thing, "nobody talked to me about managing my own money," he says. "I didn't have a concept of how to balance a checkbook" or have a budget.

"I kind of fell off my face," he says now, and he headed back home to Fresno.

"My father told me there is only one job where you start at the top, and that's digging a hole. That's always been my mentality."

Other former athletes may talk football or other professional sports. The main thing on Brookter's mind, though, as he speaks to a room of USU students is the concept that spooks and overwhelms students: networking. To Brookter, networking is just a cousin to mentorship. It's all about making connections, striking sparks, "getting exposure," he says.

Brookter recalls that he got advice from a friend's mother — a nascent network of one — who was a board member for a local nonprofit. The Fresno Career Development

Institute was looking for someone to give job-training workshops to former inmates.

"I said, 'OK, I graduated from Utah State,'" he remembers telling himself. "I have a degree in communications. I should be able to do workshops. I enjoy talking to people, right? Public speaking — I can do that, right?"

On his first day, he was handed a packet and told, "there are three people waiting." As he tentatively entered the classroom, "my main thought was: 'What the hell am I going to tell somebody that's been incarcerated for 15 years about what to do with their life?'" he says now. "I don't even know what I'm doing with my own life."

Still, he connected with the job. But at home with old friends, things weren't quite as satisfactory. "The conversations they were having were still about high school. And I wanted to talk about college and about career" opportunities, he said.

And, for the first time, he understood why his father always nagged him about the quality of his friends.

He decided to return to college for a master's of business administration, an inspiration that had two sources. "I wanted to hang out with people who are more educated than I am and I aspire to be like," he said. Plus, he felt he owed it to the folks he'd been trying to help gain employment.

"So I said, 'Hey, if I'm working in the nonprofit world or in the government world, I probably should understand business,'" he said.

With an MBA and now as director of the Fresno nonprofit, Brookter was offered a new job as programs coordinator at a nonprofit organization in San Francisco. Again, he credits his expanding personal network. At Young Community Developers, he continued the climb up the ladder, becoming director of operations and is now the executive director.

What had started out as a job became a passion, and he realized this about himself: "My purpose is public service."

Young Community Developers, or YCD as it's known, focuses on workforce development and training undeserved, disenfranchised and isolated populations hard job skills. The center's clients range from those "below poverty level to people who have been a part of the juvenile justice systems or the current justice system," he said. The nonprofit targets its efforts on Bayview-Hunters Point, a primarily black neighborhood plagued

by substandard housing, limited employment and racial discrimination. Its legacy of radiological contamination still continues, thanks to Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, which in World War II and in following decades served as the decontamination point for nuclear vessels.

Based on Brookter's achievements there, as well as a growing network of law enforcement and government, he was nominated and then confirmed as a member of San Francisco's seven-member Police Commission.

Young Community Developers focuses on mitigating the accumulation of set-backs that can keep people perpetually in poverty, using such solutions as credit restoration, expungement of criminal records, paying rent deposits, earning driver's licenses, finding childcare. Right now, Brookter's focus is what he calls a "cradle to career" path for young people. As he explains, "I want to figure out how we break the cycles of generational poverty."

A big part of this is what he's speaking about to students at USU: mentors and mentoring. Brookter is beginning with establishing a "pipeline of programs" that lets youngsters see models of successful adulthood. For instance, many youngsters don't have a model of adults holding down a job. The "pipeline" continues through school years and includes collaboration with the San Francisco United School District to improve academics stay with students following graduation.

As he explains, "If all you're doing is offering more summer school courses to make sure that kids graduate, that doesn't mean that they're getting what they need in school."

So, you want to to be a mentor?

DJ Brookter responds:

I think a lot of it happens organically. I've had mentors that I now recognize as mentors) as I look back, like my high school counselor. There wasn't a formal conversation to say, 'You're going to be my mentor'. The counselor was able to mentor me by giving advice and saying, 'I'm now challenging you to do something different than the status quo of what you've been doing.'

So I tell people, it's about that relationship, right? It has to go both ways. Even the young people that I spend time with, I let them know that if I'm not learning from you, and you're only learning from me, then that's not what mentoring and mentorship is about.

I tell young people, 'I want to speak to you about my experiences and what I've been through that might be able to help you. However, I need to know about your experiences and what you're going through because there's things nowadays ... that I've never had to face before that I can still help you critically think through.'

Story by Janelle Hyatt

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