



Q & A



From Dropout to Doctorate *Breaking the Chains of Educational Injustice*

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“Terence Lester’s book is raw, unfiltered, and deeply personal, yet it exposes a larger truth about resilience and the fight against racism. This isn’t just one man’s journey; it’s a call to action for all of us. Some will finish with renewed conviction, while others will realize they can’t stay on the sidelines. Either way, no one walks away untouched.”

—C. J. Stewart, transformational coach and former MLB player

An Interview with Terence Lester

Q: You have written on a number of topics that are especially important to you, including homelessness, race, justice, and the unseen. What was different about writing *From Dropout to Doctorate*?

Terence Lester: This book is probably the most vulnerable I’ve ever been in my writing. I’ve told stories to advocate for others, to bring awareness to homelessness, poverty, injustice, the power of truly seeing people, affirming the worth of those who are often overlooked, and to educate others on how to get involved in creating change in their community—but this book required me to turn the mirror inward. I had to reflect on my own life and the journey I took to experience change myself. I had to relive moments that shaped me—poverty, trauma, instability, abuse, academic failure, but also faith, community, and the power of being seen.

While I examine the post-Civil Rights era and the impact of transgenerational trauma through a scholarly lens, I also write from a deeply personal place. Through that lens, I’ve come to realize that my pain gave birth to the passion behind my lifelong advocacy—calling others to get involved in the work of justice. It’s one thing to study educational inequity; it’s another to have lived it less than fifteen years after the Civil Rights Act was passed.

This book isn’t just about telling my story—it’s about naming the weight of what it took to navigate poverty, trauma, and structurally designed injustice while still trying to pursue higher education and obtain a PhD. It also meant honoring my roots—growing up off Campbellton Road in southwest Atlanta—while confronting systems that tried to limit who I could become academically and beyond.

Q: Why was it important for you to write this book, for this time in history?

Terence: Education is no longer just a talking point—it’s a battleground. From executive orders to budget cuts, we’ve watched the Department of Education shrink its support for basic needs like school meals, mental health services, and critical staffing. These shifts have placed both K-12 schools and colleges—especially in urban and rural counties—at serious risk. Many educators whose roles are funded by federal grants now face uncertainty, and the schools that serve students from under resourced areas are feeling the greatest strain. And as these policies deepen, higher education becomes more fragile—especially for Black students and for those in communities where poverty is concentrated and opportunity has always been limited.



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On paper, these look like policy changes and raw data. But in real life, they're deeply personal and have lasting impact on people's lives. They affect the student who depends on school for their only hot meal. The one who finds safety, connection, and a chance to dream in the classroom. I know this, because I was that student.

Q: Who did you have in mind as you were writing *From Dropout to Doctorate*?

Terence: I wrote this book for the student who is barely holding on. The one navigating hunger, grief, instability, or silence. The one showing up to class every day carrying weights no one sees. I wrote it for the fifth-year senior who thinks it's too late. For the person who never had a role model with a college degree and is trying to figure it out on their own. For the adult who has long ago graduated from high school or dropped out and is contemplating going back to school—because the dream still lingers.

I also wrote it for the people behind the scenes: the educators who see potential in students even when they're struggling, the mentors who show up consistently, the advocates fighting for policy change, and the caregivers doing everything they can to create a better future. I wrote it for aspiring educators, social workers, clinicians, professors, and those investing in the futures of students and people trying to overcome barriers.

I wrote it for the college student who is unhoused, the family experiencing housing instability, and the student who feels shame because of it. I wrote it for my mother, who never stopped pushing me. For my father, who became one of my closest friends before he passed away. I wrote it for my community—often overlooked, but full of strength, resilience, and brilliance.

I wrote it for the overlooked—for those who never made the honor roll, who never got called “gifted,” but who still carry something sacred and powerful within them.

I believe this book matters because, by the grace of God, I made it out—and honestly, I'm still making it out. But I know my story isn't just mine to hold. I want to use it to inspire students, young adults, older adults who've had to take a non-traditional path, and the advocates and educators fighting to create real access.

And lastly, I wrote this to spark hope in a time when education is becoming an increasingly difficult and political conversation.

This book comes straight from my heart—for the educators on the frontlines, for the students trying to make it out of underfunded and targeted environments, for the advocates who believe education should be accessible to all, and for those of us who, as Tupac said, were roses that had to grow through concrete.

Q: What is the central idea you hope to convey to readers?

Terence: Educational journeys—whether traditional or nontraditional—matter, especially for people from historically marginalized communities. We must fight to ensure that Black and Brown brilliance has space in academia, even when it rises from places with limited access, few resources, and systemic barriers. Poverty and divestment may delay a dream, but they don't have to destroy it.

It is for the reader who needs to be reminded that “Your path is still valid—even if it doesn't look like anyone else's. And sometimes, the best version of you only shows up when you're supported, affirmed, and seen.”



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This book isn't a highlight reel—it's a testimony of survival, endurance, and showing up in systems that were never built with us in mind. It's raw. It's real. And it's rooted in the belief that transformation doesn't require perfection—it requires presence, community, compassion, and the power of God.

I wrote it to remind some reader that, "You don't have to be a policymaker or professor to make a difference. Anyone can be part of the support system that helps someone rise above what they have gone through. I'm living proof that a few people choosing to care can shift an entire future."

Earning a PhD wasn't something I did alone—it was a collective effort. I had people who stepped in, systems I had to push through, and a whole lot of grace along the way. The truth is, poverty, trauma, and injustice start working against many students long before they get a chance to dream. That's why this message matters. The heart of this book is simple: we must make room for those who've been pushed to the margins. And that starts by listening to their stories, believing in their potential, and standing with them until they rise.

Q: What are five takeaways you want to leave with readers?

Terence:

- **Community is a lifeline.** Behind every student who makes it through adversity, there's usually someone who showed up. A teacher. A church. A mentor. A volunteer. But it's that consistent presence that can disrupt a path shaped by poverty, trauma, or instability—and help someone reclaim their potential.
- **Trauma-informed practices change outcomes.** Students bring more than books into the classroom—they carry their stories. This book pushes us to rethink how education systems respond to pain, showing how compassion, not punishment, opens the door to real learning.
- **Policy impacts educational outcomes.** From food insecurity to school closures, policy decisions directly shape whether students have what they need to thrive. This book connects the dots between policy, trauma, poverty, and education—offering a fuller picture that policy alone can't explain.
- **Exposure expands educational possibility.** Students can't dream beyond what they've seen. When they're introduced to people, places, and ideas that reflect their potential, it widens their sense of what's possible. This book shows how exposure isn't extra—it's essential.
- **Nontraditional doesn't mean less than.** Many students take a different route—some drop out, start over, or return years later. This book honors those journeys as courageous, resilient, and worthy of the same recognition and respect as any other path.

Q: What is your ultimate hope for the readers of *From Dropout to Doctorate*?

Terence: My ultimate hope is that readers walk away understanding that educational inequity isn't theoretical—it's lived. Behind every data point about dropout rates, underfunded schools, and academic failure is a real story—full of complexity, potential, and pain. I want people to begin asking different questions: How are systems built? Who are they built for? And how can we reimagine them?

More than anything, I want readers to believe that change is still possible—not just for those who rise from hard places, but for those who choose to stand beside them. I hope students who've been counted out feel seen—and reminded that their future is still worth fighting for. I hope educators feel recharged, encouraged to keep showing up with empathy and urgency. I hope community leaders, faith-based organizations, and policymakers ask themselves what it looks like to become part of the solution—especially in places where educational access has been blocked or broken.

This book is a reminder that transformation is not just personal—it's collective. It takes all of us. My story is just one story, but if it opens a door, sparks a conversation, or helps shift how we think about access and equity, then it's doing exactly what it was meant to do.



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Dr. Terence Lester, Author of *From Dropout to Doctorate*

“Dr. Terence Lester is a force of nature, a beacon of hope, and a testament to the transformative power of resilience and love! From Dropout to Doctorate is more than just a memoir; it’s a road map for anyone who has ever felt marginalized, overlooked, or counted out. Dr. Lester’s story is one of raw vulnerability and unwavering determination. He doesn’t shy away from the harsh realities of his past but rather uses them as a platform to inspire and empower others. His journey from academic struggle to achieving a doctorate is nothing short of miraculous, and his ability to share that journey with us, the readers, with such transparency is truly remarkable.”

—Elizabeth Rosner, author of *DebtFreeDegree* and Nonviolence365® trainer at The King Center

Dr. Terence Lester is a storyteller, public scholar, speaker, community activist, and author. He is the founder and executive director of Love Beyond Walls, a nonprofit organization focused on raising awareness about poverty, homelessness, and community mobilization. Additionally, he serves as the director of public policy and social change and as a professor at Simmons College of Kentucky (HBCU). He received his PhD with a concentration in public policy and social change from Union Institute and University.

Terence has authored four additional books with IVP, including one with his sixteen-year-old daughter, Zion, titled *Zion Learns to See: Opening Our Eyes to Homelessness*. The other titles include *I See You: How Love Opens Our Eyes to Invisible People*, *When We Stand: The Power of Seeking Justice Together*, and *All God’s Children: How Confronting Buried History Can Build Racial Solidarity*.

At the age of sixteen, Terence was a high-school dropout and a member of a gang. A rebellious teen, he lived on the streets and even attempted to take his own life. At twenty, he was arrested. In jail, he met a man who talked to him about life decisions. It was the first time he had ever heard the good news. By the start of the following year, he was submitting to a call to share his testimony to change the lives of others.

Three ideals drive Terence:

1. Anyone can make a difference.
2. We don’t live forever.
3. It’s worth dedicating one’s life to ensuring no one feels invisible.

Terence is known for nationwide campaigns that bring awareness to homelessness, poverty, and economic inequality. His awareness campaigns have been featured on MLK50, CNN, *Good Morning America*, *Essence*, TEDx, TVONE, *Creative Mornings*, *USA Today*, NBC News, *Black Enterprise*, *Rolling Out*, *Upworthy*, and more. These campaigns have been viewed by millions of people worldwide.



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BIO



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In 2016, Terence led the March Against Poverty, where he walked from Atlanta, Georgia (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Headquarters) to the White House—more than eight hundred miles—to bring attention to homelessness in the US. Terence led the 2018 March Against Poverty as he walked from Atlanta to Memphis, a total of three hundred eighty-six miles. He finished the march and spoke at the historic Lorraine Motel for the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination.

In 2019, Terence opened Dignity Museum—the first museum in the US to represent people experiencing homelessness—out of a shipping container.

Terence has delivered countless sermons and speeches at conferences, organizations, companies, churches, schools, corporate settings, classrooms, and several unique spaces, including the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC, The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, the Center for Civil and Human Rights, CCDA, Radio One’s Praise in the Park, Morehouse College, Georgia Tech, Alabama University, and Paine College, among others.

He has spoken on the same platform as many other civil and human rights activists, such as Dr. Bernice King, Roland Martin, Gina Belafonte, Dr. Vonnetta West, Carlos Rodriguez, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, and Dr. Liz Theoharis. Terence’s approach combines storytelling and digital media to help illustrate social justice issues with practical strategies to solve these ailments.

Terence holds an associate arts degree in media production (2005), a bachelor of arts in theology (2008), a master of education in counseling (2010), a master of arts in theological studies (2012), and a PhD from Union Institute and University with a concentration in public policy and social change (2023). He has served on several ministerial staffs and currently writes a weekly newsletter entitled “From Streets to Scholarship” that addresses the intersection of public policy, poverty, race, and faith.

Terence has also received numerous awards for his community activism, including being named one of Atlanta’s top 500 leaders by *Atlanta Magazine*, being named one of Coca-Cola’s History Shakers, receiving the National Urban League Humanitarian Award, Brawny Giant Award, the American Express NextGen Award, the BCI Author of the Year Award, the SCLC Social Advocacy Award, Atlanta Voice’s “50 under 50,” the True to Atlanta Award presented by the Atlanta Hawks, Fulton County Schools Service Award, Plywood People’s Innovator Award, and BCI’s Author of the Year Award.

Terence is happily married to his best friend, Cecilia, and they have two amazing children, Zion Joy and Terence II.

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