

# A Year to Remember: For Memphis teen, where there's a way, there's a will

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At 6:05 most mornings, Josh Salter is at the MATA bus stop at Jackson and Maury, a bleak corner on a sunny day and grimmer in the grainy light of dawn. He's waiting on the No. 32, a symbol of the dozens of connections he's got to make to change the arc of his life in North Memphis.

The 32 takes Josh to the Downtown terminal. He waits 30 minutes for the No. 52, which gets him within walking distance of Middle College High in the Art Deco-style school at East Parkway and Central. It's roughly 7:15. School starts at 8 a.m.

His mother, Monique Salter, works the red-eye at Circle K in Raleigh, which means she leaves for work at 9:30 p.m. During harvest, she also grades cotton for USDA in an eight-hour shift that starts at 8 a.m., two hours after the overnight ends. In between, she drives to another Circle K to rest. If things work out — it's not cold and the parking lot is quiet — she can lay her head back and get a 20-minute nap in the car before she must go again.

His father, Jason C. Simon, is serving a 15-year sentence in West Tennessee State Penitentiary on cocaine charges. He'll be free in 2023. He was 28 when he was sentenced. At that point, he had been charged with theft of property over \$10,000, aggravated rape, felon in possession of a gun, indecent exposure and a litany of thefts.

“My dad made a few bad choices here and there,” Josh says, surrounded by books and hushed seriousness in the library at Christian Brothers University. At 16, he is a junior at Middle College High, a public school run by Shelby County Schools, and freshman at CBU, where he has just completed 15 credits in his first semester of college.

“I still look up to him because he’s shown me everything I shouldn’t do. He’s incarcerated. I am not ashamed of it because it’s the reality,” Josh says. “Crying and stuff that like don’t really help the situation. They are just ways to cope with the situation. I would rather find a solution.”

When Josh graduates from high school in the spring of 2016, he plans to have 69 college credits from CBU in a schedule that only works if he passes each class on the first try, that city buses not only run but run efficiently and that he can get by on six hours of sleep a night — or less — for another 17 months.

Next semester, he is registered for 16 credits, another full load.

“I have to make something of myself because I can’t stay at home,” Josh says. “My mom doesn’t mean it in a harsh way. She’s just saying, ‘In 18 years, you should have made something of yourself.’ I tell her, ‘Mama, I don’t want to stay here at home. There’s a bigger world out there.’ If I stay here, I’m holding myself back.

“I’m trying to take advantage of the options around me,” Josh says, “because most kids my age, most kids my race, don’t take advantage of anything.”

He also works 16 hours a week at the Chick-fil-A on Union. His grandmother picks him up in her 2003 Nissan Sentra at 10 p.m. when his shift is over.

“She drives slow, so I usually don’t get home until about 10:30. I take a bath, then look at my homework. I usually get to bed around twelve,” Josh said.

But without her, he wouldn’t be able to keep the job. And without Middle College High, he wouldn’t be dreaming of earning half a bachelor’s degree — for free — and he hopes, catching some second looks in college admissions offices.

“Most of our students are very motivated,” says Middle College principal Docia Generette. “What’s a little different about Josh is he has a strong vision for his future, which means that he is not only an inspiration to the adults around him but the other students.

“He comes from a similar background and the same neighborhoods they do. They don’t even know anyone who has gone to college. When young students come in and see that he doing it, they think, ‘Maybe I can succeed too,’” she said.

The school shares the former Fairview Junior High with the Maxine Smith STEAM Academy, the new middle school dedicated to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math, plus art). The idea is that sixth, seventh and eighth-grade students at Maxine Smith will get a strong enough background in sciences to transition up the stairs to Middle College on the second and third floors. There, the goal is getting up to college speed by the time they are juniors so they can cross the street to CBU.

To qualify, they need a high-school transcript full of A’s and B’s and a 21 on the ACT test.

Josh earned his 21 in ninth grade. This semester, he took college-level cultural anthropology, general psychology, elementary Spanish, microeconomics and English composition at CBU. At Middle College, he took English III, physical education and an online version of Algebra II, the only way he could work it his schedule.

“I’m just like any other student at CBU,” Josh says. “I have the assignments, the same papers to write. I am treated the same as everyone else.”

The mission is personal for Josh on several levels. He feels called to make a difference in Memphis. He also sees himself as the male role model for his two younger sisters, whose fathers are also not involved their lives.

“I have to set the example of what a positive male should be,” he says. “They should look for a man who is hard working and dedicated, somebody like their big brother; somebody who can show everybody that you can make it out of where you come from.”

What’s easy to miss is how physically hard it is to change the trajectory of poverty in Memphis and the level of intrinsic motivation it takes to want to pull it off.

“My alarm goes off at 5:30. I don’t even move until 5:45,” Josh says. “If I have my work clothes ready, I bring them with me. That way I can catch the bus from school and go to work. I sit there a few hours before works starts.

“Some days I don’t want to wake up; I don’t want to come to school,” he says. “I have to remind myself that it is going to be worth it in the end. Whatever college I go to, I will be prepared. I will already have a two-year head start on my education. And graduating from college at age 20 is not something a lot of people can say they did.”

But if he didn’t get his work clothes ready the night before, he has to take the bus back Downtown and catch the transfer to Maury where he lives with his grandma during the week, then catch the bus back to Midtown. If it’s on time, he arrives happy and confident. If not, he’s anxious and tardy.

“I have a job because I got tired of asking my mom for money,” he says. “I want to have a car by my senior year so I can get around more efficiently. I can wake up later. My schedule will be more for me and not everyone else.”

But it’s lonely being a high school kid caught between two worlds and without enough time to live fully in either.

“It’s also lonely because some times you have to do stuff without assistance,” Josh said.

One or two friends from Middle College were in almost all his classes at CBU last semester, but there was no one person in all of them. So while he says he has lots of friends, no one but him lives and feels the totality of what he is trying to do.

The constrictions pop up in little, everyday ways. Josh lost his glasses last fall. Between the intensity of his schedule and the relentlessly little he sees his mother, there has been no time to get an eye appointment. So, he squints in class.

Josh ended up at Middle College on the recommendation of Kevin Malone, the principal at Bellevue Middle who saw something more than the usual middle school swagger in Josh Salter.

He’s seen few kids willing to work as hard and who take direction as well as Josh. He also sees few kids sophisticated enough in their early teens to brush themselves off and keep going.

“My favorite quote is from Frederick Douglass: ‘If there is no struggle, there is no progress.’ I know Josh has had some personal struggles, and that makes it all the more gratifying when you reach success,” Malone said.

“For all those people out there who believe there is not a bright future in Memphis, they need to take a look at kids like Josh Salter. If we can focus on the positive and not accentuate the negative, you’ll see we have so much to offer.”

Except for church, by family rule, Sunday is the one day that neither Josh nor his sisters Jocelyn, 13, and Joya, 8, are allowed to make plans. The family shows up early to The Truth Church, a three-year old congregation of 40 that meet in the gym at the Greenlaw Community Center, a squat, utilitarian cinder block on a grassy patch of Uptown.

Monique Salter, 35, is an usher. On the first Sunday in December, she had gotten off work at 6 a.m. and was seated at the gymnasium door in a black T-shirt that says “I am the Truth.”

She’s tired, “but after a while, your body gets used to it. It’s Sunday, and my body knows I just have to hang on a few more hours,” she says.

“As soon as we get home from church, we’re going to bed. All of us.”

At church, no one gets by Monique without a hug, and it often happens just as people — members and visitors alike — step through the front door. It can happen again as she ushers people to their seats and again when they get ready to leave. Across the room, Josh is working the sound board for the service, adjusting the volume, smoothing out the sound and projecting slides on the wall behind preacher Charles Daniels’ head.

“If it’s not work-related, Monique is going to be there,” Daniels says after the service. “Even when her car was down, she would find a way to get church and get her children to church. Sometimes, she wouldn’t have a ride home, and she’d just be by the door like she was waiting for someone.

“She’d say, ‘We’ll figure out a way to get there when it’s time to go home,’” Daniels says. “She has a way of living by faith. She’s raised Josh and the girls to take life in stride: ‘It’s going to hit you; it’s going to knock you down. You just get up and make whatever adjustments you

have to make to keep moving.’

“She really lives by the mantra that what doesn’t kill you, what doesn’t take you out, really makes you stronger. She teaches that to her children.”

From her viewpoint, she’s teaching them to try harder, to see connections, to take risks and to do as much as they can today to make tomorrow easier.

“If you have an extra hour, clean your room, redo your homework. Do anything to make yourself better. If you get 100, try again. It might have been easy, but try to get 105,” she says. “You can always do better.

“And when it feels like everything’s falling apart, that’s the sign that God’s about to make it all make sense,” she says. “Just hold on; something is about to happen.”

Josh’s ambitions make him a bit of a stranger in North Memphis, and that is part of the journey.

“I love North Memphis, let me say that first and foremost. It’s where I grew up and where most of my friends are. Well, most of my former friends,” he says quietly.

“It’s not that I don’t have time. They chose a different path.”

He doesn’t think he’s better. The truth is, he says, is he is too afraid to live like they do; too afraid also of wasting his life.

The cooperation between CBU and the Shelby County Schools at Middle College started when Kriner Cash was superintendent. With a strong engineering campus across the street from a public school, he saw the beginnings of a 6-16 track, a way to give sixth-graders a pathway to a high school diploma grounded in math and science, plus the four additional years it would take to earn a college diploma, without having to leave the city.

Because CBU is known for its engineering, it made sense, Generette says, to give the new Maxine Smith campus a science-math focus.

“That’s how the Maxine Smith concept came to be,” she said.

LeMoyne-Owen College has a similar partnership with Hollis F. Price Middle College High, a high school tucked into the historically black campus.

Both high schools score high academically. This year, Middle College High was the only public school in the city limits to be in the top 5 percent both for academic achievement and for the speed in which students are improving.

But even at Middle College, Josh is an anomaly. In mid-December, there were 234 students enrolled. Even in a school set up for high-achievers, Josh is in the top 1 percent. Only he and senior Maia Jamerson are on track to earn the 60-plus college credits it's possible to get through the partnership.

"We make it through the week; we boost each other up," Josh said. "I wish I was in her position right now. She's at the end of her race. I'm in the middle of mine."

While the students don't have to pay for the credits, they are not free. Eligible juniors and seniors qualify for \$300 per course from the Tennessee Student Assistance Corp. SCS and donors cover the gap.

"And we do have donors and people that really believe in the school," Generette said.

When it's going well, Josh is philosophical and optimistic about his plans. When the bus is late or doesn't come at all, they seem tenuous and wispy. Three weeks ago, he stopped in for a haircut on a Saturday at 4 p.m. before heading to the nighttime shift at Chick-fil-A.

"My barber took way longer than I thought. I didn't leave until 5:30, which made me 15 or 20 minutes late for work," he says with a cringe.

"I was highly upset. I've never been that late for work. But I've learned to literally take a step back and take a deep breath," he said. "And then I go on with my day. I get my temper from my dad. I don't know how, but I do."

Josh has not seen his father, who will be eligible for parole in 2017, for several years. He remembers being happy when he was around, but even then, at age 8, Josh knew the happiness was fleeting. He'd already seen his father come and go several times.

