



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on March 19, 2013

Gifted Hands

A remarkable book titled [Gifted Hands](#) tells the personal story of Benjamin Carson, a black kid from the Detroit ghetto who went on to become a renowned neurosurgeon.

At one time young Ben Carson had the lowest grades in his middle school class, and was the butt of teasing by his white classmates. Worse yet, he himself believed that he was just not smart enough to do the work.



Fortunately for him, his mother, whose own education went no further than the third grade, insisted that he was smart. She cut off the television set and made him and his brother hit the books — books that she herself could scarcely read.

As young Ben's school work began to catch up with that of his classmates, and then began to surpass that of his classmates, his whole view of himself and of the wider world around him began to change. He began to think that he wanted to become a doctor.

There were a lot of obstacles to overcome along the way, including the fact that his mother had to be away from time to time for psychiatric treatment, as she tried to cope with the heavy pressures of trying to raise two boys whose father had deserted the family that she now had to support on a maid's wages.

In many ways the obstacles facing young Ben Carson were like those faced by so many other youngsters in the ghetto. What was different was that he overcame those obstacles with the help of a truly heroic mother and the values she instilled in him.

It is an inspiring personal story, told plainly and unpretentiously, including the continuing challenges he faced later as a neurosurgeon operating on the brains of people with life-threatening medical problems, often with the odds against them.

To me it was a personal story in another sense, that some of his experiences as a youngster brought back experiences that I went through growing up in Harlem many years earlier.

I could understand all too well what it was like to be the lowest performing child in a class. That was my situation in the fourth grade, after my family had moved up from the South, where I had been one of the best students in the third grade — but in a grossly inferior school system.

Now I sometimes found myself in tears because it was so hard to try to get through my homework.

But in one sense I was much more fortunate than Ben Carson and other black youngsters today. The shock of being in a school, whose standards were higher than I was able to meet at first, took place in an all-black school in Harlem, so that there was none of the additional complications that such an experience can have for a black youngster in a predominantly white school.

By the time I first entered a predominantly white school, I had already caught up, and had no trouble with the school work. Decades later, in the course of running a research project, I learned that the Harlem school, where I had so much trouble catching up, had an average IQ of 84 back when I was there.



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In the predominantly white school to which I later went, I was put in a class for children with IQs of 120 and up, and had no trouble competing with them. But I would have been totally wiped out if I had gone there two years earlier — and who knows what racial hang-ups that might have led to?

Chance plays a large part in everyone's life. The home in which you are raised is often a big part of luck being on your side or against you. But you don't need parents with Ph.D.s to make sure that you make the most of your education.

The kinds of things that statisticians can measure, such as family income or parents' education, are not the crucial things. The family's attitude toward education and toward life can make all the difference.

Virtually everything was against young Ben Carson, except for his mother's attitudes and values. But, armed with her outlook, he was able to fight his way through many battles, including battles to control his own temper, as well as external obstacles.

Today, Dr. Benjamin Carson is a renowned neurosurgeon at a renowned institution, Johns Hopkins University. But what got him there was wholly different from what is being offered to many ghetto youths today, much of which is not merely futile but counterproductive.

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