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Second-grade mentee presents diploma to ASU student

When Todd Leigh walked across the stage during Albany State University's Spring Commencement, he didn't receive his diploma from the university's president. Instead, he received it from Kadarius Williams, a second-grader from Dawson.

In his last year as a student at ASU, Leigh, along with other members of the Center for the African American Male (CAAM), participated in an outreach mentoring program with 23 second-grade boys at Lillie Cooper Primary School in Dawson. Leigh was partnered with Williams. From the outset, Leigh was inspired to give Williams something he did not have growing up.

"My childhood was not the best, and I always felt like I would have really benefited from having a mentor," Leigh said. "It was not until I got to college that I had real mentors. I did not want Kadarius to have to wait as long as I did."

Leigh said that keeping in touch and being consistent with Williams was paramount in the progression of their relationship.

"Many times mentors see their mentees one time and think that that will make a difference," he said. "I wanted to show [Kadarius] that I was not going to be in his life one minute and out the next."

Leigh periodically spoke to Williams' teachers to see how he was doing in class. Every couple of weeks, a few other CAAM members and Leigh would travel to Dawson to eat lunch with the second-graders and help them with their homework. They took them to church and participated in other group activities on campus.

As the year went on, Leigh began to see a change in Williams. Leigh acknowledged that things were "weird" for both of them at first because it was a new experience.

"[Kadarius] was not used to having someone act as a big brother to him, and I was not accustomed to being a mentor," Leigh said. "Once he saw that I was serious about mentoring him, he gradually began to open up and become more vocal. There were times he would call me and tell me when he was coming to town."

Leigh said that Williams' mother, Sophia King, was very supportive of the relationship the two had and was really impressed when he gave Williams a Christmas gift.

When Williams presented Leigh with his diploma during Commencement, Leigh was elated that Williams saw him achieve that accomplishment.

"Hopefully, he will see himself graduating from college like that one day," Leigh said. "I want him to know that if I can do it there is no reason he cannot do the same."

Leigh set quite an example for Williams. During his time at ASU, Leigh campaigned to be Mr. ASU, was active in Paraprofessionals Promoting Peer'fection, and served as the senior class president.

In the fall Leigh will attend Illinois State University to pursue a master's degree in public speaking and communication. Leigh plans to re-

main in contact with Williams by calling him weekly and visiting when possible. He said that he is amazed with the number of things that he and Williams have in common. In addition Leigh has seen an improvement



Kadarius Williams, a second-grader at Lillie Cooper Primary School in Dawson, presents the diploma to his mentor Todd Leigh during Commencement May 3 as ASU President Everette J. Freeman looks on.

in himself.

"I have several brothers and sisters, but growing up you do not really appreciate them because you live with them and see them all the time," he explained. "Meeting Williams has really taught me patience and improved my family relations by having a more open mind."

Leigh, along with the other CAAM members, hopes to be around to witness the second-graders graduate from college in 2018.