

by DR. JULIUS FEW JR.

“YOU have to stand up for yourself at all times no matter how big the person or obstacle!” These are the words my father, Julius Few, Sr., would repeat to me throughout my childhood. My father was many things: An Air Force veteran. One of the first black executives hired at IBM. And, most meaningfully, he was also my best friend.

My childhood was filled with what folks today often call “challenges.” Raised in an all-white suburb of Detroit, I was called the “N-word” on a daily basis. But, during my senior year in high school, I decided I would no longer be a victim. Back then I was a football player and one day a pair of fellow players began hurling racial slurs at me. So I fought back — and won. Still, bullies are never satisfied. Another player came up to me and said, “No matter how many of us you beat up, you will always be the same ‘N-word.’” His words stung deeply. But they also opened my eyes, and right there I made two promises to God: First, that I would work hard to succeed in life and, second, I would use that success to give back — and protect the voiceless.

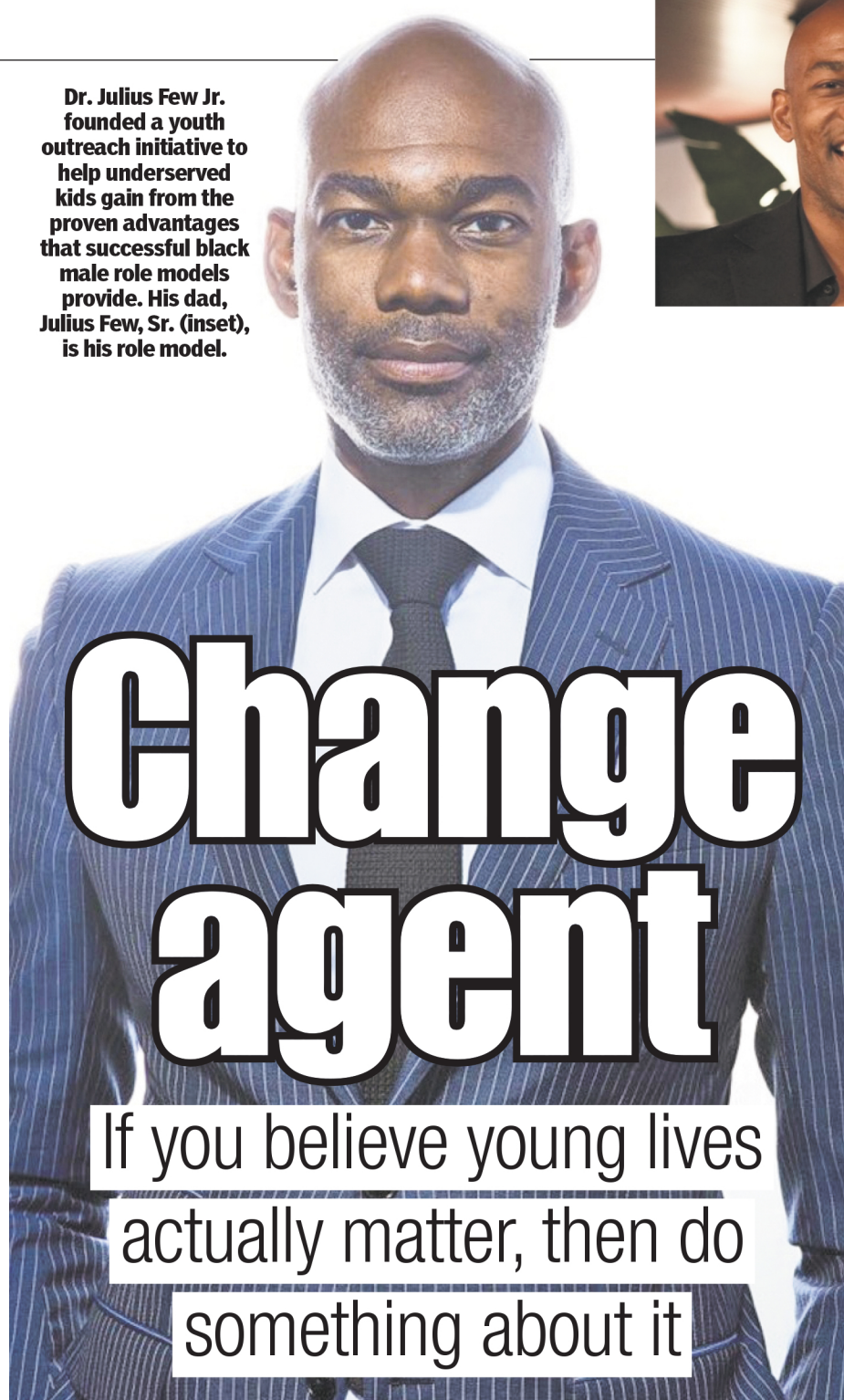
My mother and father believed in blazing trails and they instilled this same drive in me. At age 6, I knew I wanted to be a doctor — even though there were no doctors in our family. This was my calling, and I was going to heed it.

I graduated from University of Chicago Medical School with honors and completed a residency in General Surgery at the University of Michigan. I then finished my training in plastic surgery at Northwestern University and later secured surgical fellowships in New York, Atlanta and Honolulu. Like back in Michigan, I was usually the only black person wherever I went — hardly surprising since African Americans comprise barely 2% of all plastic surgeons in the US. Nonetheless, throughout my career I’ve met generous, compassionate folks who look nothing like me. And many of these same people became vocal champions of my success.

I wanted to do the same for others, so I helped establish The Few Initiative for Children in 2016. Our initiative is not a charity. Rather, we empower students to become true community leaders.

Along the way, we help them avoid scourges like gangs, truancy and violence while helping them help others achieve similar outcomes. Our initiative’s ambassadors are mostly mi-

Dr. Julius Few Jr. founded a youth outreach initiative to help underserved kids gain from the proven advantages that successful black male role models provide. His dad, Julius Few, Sr. (inset), is his role model.



norities who typically begin our program midway through high school. Students are selected both for their commitment to education as well as willingness to serve their communities. Mostly from the Chicago area, our ambassadors attend events such as town halls with local police to reduce tensions around accidental shootings and learn essential life-building skills like nutrition and financial literacy.

Each year we average between 15 and 20 ambassadors and support their quests to complete college or university. To date, our graduation rate exceeds 90% — a tremendous success when you consider that only 29% of African Americans adults hold bachelor degrees or higher, compared to 45% of white Americans. To date, 25 students have successfully completed our program and 20 more are currently working on a range of community projects. Our students have graduated from Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, Morehouse and many other prestigious colleges.

I wasn’t always certain our initiative would succeed. Sometimes I worried I wasn’t doing enough. But my father reminded me that I was a role model. And if I could help just one child excel, then our entire effort was worthwhile.

His words also backed up what researchers have long known: black youth, particularly black boys, are most likely to succeed if they’re surrounded by successful black male role models. Those men do not need to be their *actual fathers*; just positive role models making an impact on their lives.

We live at a time where bad news has become the norm. As a recent study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace revealed, the US has never been more polarized politically. Which is why, even amid such great national discord, humility and humanity are the most impactful equalizers of all. This was a lesson I learned the hard way back in the locker rooms of my youth. And it’s a lesson I hope to impart to a new generation of future leaders.

Dr. Julius Few, Jr., is the founder of the Few Institute for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery in Chicago.