

“William Cowan visits Milton High School’s Young Men’s Group”

By Rejeila Sami Firmin, student at Milton High School Jan 15, 2020

The Young Men’s Group of Milton High School took the pleasure of having former U.S. Senator William “Mo” Cowan talk with the group as a guest speaker on January 10th, 2020. He began by telling the young men how happy he was to “be here at the start of the new decade” for them all.

Cowan was very personable as he described just how much he wanted to get to know each young man in the room. He was a welcoming and humble presence as he began to tell his inspiring, true story.

He first wanted the members to know that the job titles he has held do not define him. He emphasized to the young men that he has gone through his fair share of difficulties, and that he wouldn't have been able to succeed without the guidance and support of others.

Cowan’s story began when he was in high school; a perfect start for the freshman-through-senior crowd. He spoke about growing up in a small town in North Carolina, where he grew up with his mother, his siblings, and his father, who was also a Vietnam War veteran. When he was only 16, his father died in a car accident while operating under the influence.

Following the accident, Cowan thought the best thing he could do for his family would be to drop out of high school and find a full time job to support his widowed mother and his siblings. However, his mother fundamentally believed that pursuing higher education would be more beneficial because, “education is the pathway and the great equalizer” that leads to success for all.

Cowan did well in high school where, although he never had a black teacher and very few male teachers, he did have several teachers who took an interest and invested in him. He attended Duke University upon graduating from high school. Cowan was the first in his immediate family to go to a four year college. He went to duke thinking he would focus on pre-med studies, simply because he believed it would provide financially but not because he had a genuine interest in the field.

Early in his first semester of classes, specifically chemistry, Cowan found himself learning new material in a review course. He struggled, quickly fell behind in academics and was the lowest performing student in his class. He had poor study habits, no one to hold him accountable, was unorganized, and he had too much pride to ask for help.

According to Cowan, his failure was not performing the lowest in his class - he emphasized that failure is always a possibility when one tries - his true failure was refusing to take advantage of the help he knew he needed. That day, he left his class, walked right over to the academic support center, and said, "I need help, I'm struggling."

There he learned of his disinterest in being a doctor, and he realized how curious he was about political science, law, and policy. He had to fail first to succeed.

As a litigation attorney for non profits, individuals, and business disputes, Cowan found that it "wasn't all fulfilling in the way that you wish to be fulfilled in your true passion."

This message resonated with many of the young men in the room, one of which being Ronald Kindle, who said, "I enjoyed when he was talking about how he switched professions because his work in law didn't fulfil him enough. I thought that was pretty cool because it takes a lot of courage to leave a job you're good at, making a lot of money from, to go experience other types of jobs and take that risk. I remember asking him a question about it and he said you just have to believe you're going to find something more fulfilling."

Cowan proceeded to connect with the young men describing how, "In your head it's a symphony, it gets amplified." He made remarks on how black and brown men do not humble themselves enough to let other people know that they are struggling. His honesty and vulnerability reached a member named CJ Pinto who said, "he told us his background so we could actually see the steps he's taken to change and how he's improved in his life, from his past experiences and the mistakes that he made. From this we can better understand how he improved on them in the past. I really appreciated that, he was really honest with us."

Cowan's story continued when he met his mentor, Deval Patrick, former Governor of Massachusetts. As a young lawyer, Cowan attended a speech of Patrick's and could not remember what he spoke about, but remembers hanging onto his every word. Cowan said that it was less about the content of Patrick's speech, and more about how he presented himself. Cowan later called Patrick to ask him to be his mentor. He was surprised when Patrick said, "Of course I would be happy to. What are you doing right now? Come see me."

Patrick has been his mentor to this very day.

Although Deval Patrick is a very busy man, he is never too busy to ask how Cowan and his family are doing, and how he can help. Cowan says, "Good mentors are lasting, lasting treasures."

While answering a question from one of the Young Men's Group's advisors, Mr. Jones, Cowan described working for Patrick as governor, witnessing the importance of doing everything he could, helping as many people as he could. "It actually fills your soul," he said.

Cowan says that there is nothing wrong with failure, but there is everything wrong with failing to learn from it. From failure, "you will gain something of remarkable value."