

# THE PENN CURRENT

FOR STUDENTS, STAFF & FACULTY OF THE



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**STAFF Q&A/Prison provided a wake-up call for this child of the streets.**

## “I said, I’ll show the world. I was not one that you should have counted out.”

BY SARA MARCUS

It’s a straight shot down 34th Street from Robert Alsbrooks’ childhood home in the Mantua section of West Philadelphia to the office he now occupies at the Medical School.

Alsbrooks, however, took the long way around. He took a detour through the underground economy and did seven years in a state penitentiary on assault charges.

In the five years since he’s been out, he’s more than made up for lost time. In January, his contributions earned him Penn’s Martin Luther King Community Service Employee Award.

Here’s why. He’s founded organizations including Miracle @ 34th Street, which runs social and educational activities for Mantua youth; Miracle Corners of the World, which does development and service projects in Africa; and Miracle @ Penn, a new group which he hopes will draw Penn students into the first two groups’ projects. With his colleague Jesse Chittams, he is developing a research internship program for high school students called Diversity initiative in Research for Under-represented Minorities (DRUM).

Speaking quietly as his 3-year-old son napped in his arms, Alsbrooks reflected on the journey behind him and the paths yet to come.

**Q. You were involved in drug dealing when you were young. At what point did you get out of that culture?**

**A.** Incarceration turned my life around. I was only 17 years old. It was a rude awakening for me. It showed me that life will not play with you. There are people in life who are in positions that they can make decisions that can hinder your life forever. I was angry at myself for being so foolish to allow myself to be sucked into such a detrimental cycle. This anger is what motivated me. I said, I’ll show the world. I was not one that you should have counted out. That’s what I’ve been doing ever since. I’ve just been showing the world.

### ROBERT ALSBROOKS

**Position:**  
Computer programmer, Center  
for Clinical Epidemiology and  
Biostatistics

**Length of service:**  
2 years

**Other stuff:**  
Is featured in the final chapter of  
Elijah Anderson’s “Code of the  
Street”; gives two speeches a year  
at Wharton on leadership; has  
three children, ages 3, 4 and 5.

[Prison] is the best thing that ever happened to me. Because it woke me up. It made me realize that I was a sleeping giant. It made me realize my full potential. If it would have never happened, guess what? I’d be still walking around not knowing what I could do, ‘cause I was never challenged. That was the ultimate challenge: You so smart, and you so brave, survive *this!* So I took the challenge on. I just keep setting other challenges on myself. I will be a millionaire. That’s my next challenge.

**Q. How are you going to become a millionaire?**

**A.** By using my keen senses and my extraordinary mind. I’m going to start a variety of businesses including motivational speaking. My strength is in creativity, developing ideas, coming up with solutions. I searched this one bureau for motivational speakers, and I saw what these people get paid. These people make good money — just talking. Why not give people solutions? You want to organize your community, this is what you need to do. You want to develop businesses in your neighborhood, this is what you should do. That’s how I’m going to become a millionaire.

If you’re not a dreamer, if you don’t believe in your power, you’ll never get what you’re supposed to have. I used to work at UPS, okay? And I told people about it, they



Alsbrooks (right) with the New Renaissance Men, a group of youths he mentors from University City High School.

said, Oh, you were in jail, and you got a UPS job? That’s *wonderful!* You better *never* leave that! You’d be crazy to leave that! Right? So I told people I was leaving this job. “Why? What are you gonna do?” “I don’t know what I’m gonna do yet, but I know I can’t be here. It’s time to move on.” I left. Guess what? If I wouldn’t have this one, you see?

And I tell people all the time, if you want any fruit in life, you’ve got to go out on a limb. Out on a limb is where fruit grows. You go out on a limb, you take a risk. Sure, it might break. But guess what? I’m a grab some fruit on the way down.

**Q. Talk about your mentor, the late anti-drug activist Herman Wrice.**

**A.** Dr. Wrice was like graduate school for me. When it comes to community development and systems and organizations and organizing people, motivating people, he was a grand master. He used to say to me, Rob, you’re too smart for Mantua. But you’re not ready for the world. Let me teach you.

Dr. Wrice always told me that Mantua was my testing ground. He always told me that your neighborhood will never truly ac-

cept you the way you need them to. Any time you go anywhere else, he said, it will spread like a wildfire. People tend to work better with people that they don’t know, and they get more lax with people that they do know.

**Q. What do you do at Penn?**

**A.** I help manage data and produce statistics. I’m thinking of starting my own business. More importantly — not just making money but being able to give young men and women skills that are very marketable.

I’ve got a new mentor over here at Penn. His name is Harold Haskins. I was talking to him, he said, Robert, you gotta get your Ph.D. And all weekend I’ve just been thinking about it. Doctor Alsbrooks. Doctor Robert Alsbrooks. I’m trying to get it in my head.

It gives you a good feeling when other people come and they show an interest in you, they appreciate what you’re doing and they tell you how great a person you are. It just gives you a boost. He says, you know, you need mentors. If you’ve made any successes in life, somebody helped you along the way.

Candace diCarlo