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Once Robert Alsbrooks lived by the code of the street. Now he is a community activist. And every day he is tested - by former drug acquaintances and by the society whose rules he is trying to follow.

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A gentle-looking young man wearing cornrows and a tie purposefully sets up chairs at a church in Mantua. In a couple of hours he will be moderating a workshop on entrepreneurship for neighborhood youths.

Ten years ago, Ruck, as he was known then, wouldn't be caught dead in a church. He more or less lived in the street. Today, though, he goes by Robert Alsbrooks, his given name. He is headed down a path toward decency - and creating the workshop is the first step in his attempt to take others down that same path.

Alsbrooks always knew how to make money. When he was Ruck, he made plenty of it selling packages on the corner of 34th and Wallace to the crackheads living in the run-down building across the street. He even employed a stable of apprentices - five shorties whose loyalty was well-tested, who knew how to handle his business.

At the height of his dealing, he toiled around town in a gleaming Impala - the only 17-year-old in the neighborhood to own a car. He had clothes, jewelry, cheese in his pocket, and ladies on his arm. He also had a rep for being crazy. Word on the street was that you didn't want to get in a beef with Ruck; he'd roll on you. Not only did he talk the talk, he followed up with application.

That is what Alsbrooks is doing now - following up with application. Seven years of prison did little to take away his initiative, drive or determination to succeed. Only now, the means to the end have changed.

But his transformation from street life to civility has not come without a cost. He is tested at every turn - not only by the partners he used to sell with, but by the very institutions whose rules he is trying to follow.

"[Alsbrooks] typifies the person who is caught in the middle between the street and the decent world," observes University of Pennsylvania sociologist Elijah Anderson, who took Ruck under his wing while researching his latest book, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (W.W. Norton).

"He's under great pressure [by his former dealing partners] to show his street side. . . . And, as a result of [society's] profound alienation of his community, he doesn't fully trust the police, he doesn't fully trust the criminal justice system or many of the institutions. He doesn't feel like they have his best interests at heart."

Anderson says Alsbrooks sometimes feels that the whole system is working against him, but the professor is optimistic: "He's a work in progress, but I think he's going to find a way. He has had enough of that other life."

"Aggravated assault. I shot a guy. It was second nature. In my mind I thought my behavior was justified," Alsbrooks says.

He is 28 years old, a father of three children, ages 3, 2 and 1. He has made up for lost time. While in jail, his biggest fear was that he'd never be able to procreate. He never feared dying, he says.

He works as a computer programmer at Penn, literally blocks but figuratively worlds away from the grinding poverty of the Mantua neighborhood he grew up in.

He is explaining -- in a slow, melodic voice that would rival Smokey's in or out of the shower -- how he got seven years; how a rival dealer threatened to take over his turf. He believed that everything he did was supposed to be done because he lived by the code of the street, where safety and self-esteem are determined by how much respect you command.

"I call it the two-one-five mentality," says Ruck, implicating the city, through its area code, as a place where ignorance festers. "It's a behavior that shows a blatant disregard and disrespect for another person. And it is shown in the underground economy and the above-ground economy."

His days in the life are a blur. He likens his drug-dealing period to being "in a trance, because a lot of those things they tell me I did, I don't remember."

Being the oldest of Linda Alsbrooks' nine children, Robert was forced to fend for himself when the family lived in North Philly during his early years. His father, Amiyn, was never around. (Today Amiyn vends oldies tapes on 52d and Market. "I admire his tenacity," father says of son.) Alsbrooks' only male role models were the hustlers and gangsters in the neighborhood who schooled him in "ghettonomics."

By the time Linda Alsbrooks moved her family to Mantua in 1985, Robert, 14, was ready to apply what he had learned. "I wanted to control my own thing, be my own guy. And I wanted to train people who had the initiative."

Linda Alsbrooks knew that her son was selling. She also knew that it wouldn't last.

"You know when your kids are not in it for a career," says Linda Alsbrooks, a youthful-looking 47. "When you're trying to make money, you don't care who you sell to. But he wouldn't sell drugs to people who had kids. He wouldn't sell drugs to pregnant kids. How can you sell but not sell? I think he just wanted to be the leader and get the fame and the power."

While he was in jail, Alsbrooks had plenty of time to think. He'd look at the tiers and tiers of cells, full of men cloistered two to a cell, most of them African American. How could he get revenge on a system he believes exploited him? "The only way I could pay them back," he decided, "was not to go back."

That moment crystallized his thinking. Once Alsbrooks got out, he spent hours sitting on the stoop talking with his friend Half, a former apprentice who had done five years himself.

Alsbrooks and Half understood the value of power and how to obtain it through legitimate means. Instead of drugs, they could sell fruit from a stand at the vacant lot at 34th and Haverford. Eventually, they could use the lot to build an open-air market modeled after the Italian Market. In time they could buy a gas station and put it on the adjacent corner.

But Half's dreams ended with his death from massive head injuries suffered during a motorcycle accident four months ago. Ernest "Half" Stratton was 25.

Herman Wrice is always on the lookout for a few good men. An activist who has fought drugs in Mantua for more than 30 years, Wrice has a hard time finding locals to help him clean up the neighborhood, get the dealers off the corner, to simply serve as positive role models in the community.

In Alsbrooks, Wrice saw someone who had already commanded respect on the street, someone whose example people could follow.

"I'm always looking for a black male who I can turn loose in the neighborhood, who can dispel the myths about black men doing all this bad stuff," Wrice, 60, said. "I could work with Rob because he had gone through the system and hadn't come out bitter. Instead of complaining about what's wrong, he wanted to do what's right."

Wrice gave Alsbrooks the capital to build his first fruit stand (before getting the job at Penn, Ruck operated a fruit stand and a deli counter in a neighborhood take-out).

Anderson gave Alsbrooks a job as a research assistant and introduced him to influential people at Penn, including a connection through which his protege traveled to the Ivory Coast of Africa, where he helped build schools and worked on a casaba melon farm.

Mostly, though, the older men simply provide support for a young man trying to do the right thing. Alsbrooks is taking classes at Community College with an eye toward attending Penn's Wharton School, all while, as Linda Alsbrooks puts it, "he lives his surroundings."

"People will try him," Anderson says. "It's the problem of being decent in a neighborhood that is so tough. . . . You have to code-switch, and in order to do that effectively you have to understand the fine points of decency and the fine points of street life. [Alsbrooks] does it effectively."

For the entrepreneurial workshop, which he put together with Anderson, Alsbrooks envisioned business people sharing testimonials with the neighborhood people about how they made money and perhaps even getting a commitment or two from folks willing to work on his open-air market idea.

The panelists come, but they talk mainly among themselves. Only a few neighborhood boys come through, and they get there late and leave early.

Still, Alsbrooks is pleased. The workshop is a start.

"A destructive leader leads people to slaughter. A constructive leader leads people to pasture," he says. "I want to be a constructive leader."