

Frederick Factor - The Hope Factor Transcript

Sandy: Welcome to the Frederick Factor! My name is Sandy Dubay and I'm the Season One host. Everyone who has lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick County, Maryland, knows that there is something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible, diverse community that continues to grow. Here, on this podcast, we will be bringing Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight to share their stories with you and find out what's their Frederick Factor. This was such an inspiring and uplifting conversation with Aje Hill, who is the founder and CEO of I Believe in Me, Inc.; a nonprofit serving at-risk youth in Frederick County. Aje shares his story of going from a "dop-dealer" in his youth to becoming a "hope dealer" today. After going to prison at a young age, Aje had a wake-up moment where he had to decide whether or not he believed in himself. That pivotal moment changed everything, and since then he has committed himself to his community and serving hope everywhere he goes - including this episode.

Sandy: Today, I'm excited to be speaking with Aje Hill, a young leader - I am going to emphasize the word "leader" because he and I were just having that conversation this morning here in Frederick.

Aje: Yes!

Sandy: I invited Aje to come on because I wanted to hear more about his story and this nonprofit that he has created in the last couple of years. So, Aje, welcome!

Aje: Thank you for having me, Sandy. This podcast is already off to a wonderful, embracive, and community-spirited start. As you tell me about the people you've already had here, for me it's an honor to follow behind those and to look forward to this first twelve weeks of the podcast. So, thanks for having me, thanks for inviting me, and thanks for the hospitality when I came in the door, and making me comfortable sitting here doing this podcast. But, my name is Aje Hill, Executive Director, Founder of a nonprofit here in the wonderful Frederick County, called "I Believe in Me, Inc." Our mission is to reach at-risk youth directly where they are, providing peer supports, after school mentorship, and meeting them in spaces and places that some people, or most people, won't go. I, myself, have been to a lot of dark places in my life. I like to say "hurt-people, hurt people." And me being hurt, landed me in a place where I was looking at a judge and she gave me 20 years in prison, all suspended but eight. And, at a young age, for me, going into prison, I didn't know if I would ever make it home. I didn't know that it was about survival in the place that I was about to go into. And, oftentimes, as young men - as men, we blame people. We don't accept the responsibility for our actions. Me, growing up in this wonderful

Frederick City, I had a loving mom, a loving dad, a brother, and I chose to make choices that put me in a position for the judge to give me 20 years of my life, all suspended but eight, in a penitentiary. But, what I can say is, what some people perceive as an error or mistake, someone like myself views as a gift. Because in that 20 years, all suspended but eight, my life was saved. It was my higher power that came to me, when I was crying to sleep, alone, lonely, undecided, in pain, fearful, hopeless. It was that higher power that came to me and asked me: do you believe in yourself? Wasn't none of my friends, wasn't none of my old drug dealers, wasn't my mom, wasn't my dad, wasn't my brother. It was a voice - it was my higher power. And in that higher power, I was paralyzed; I couldn't move. Because I didn't know. I had a mask over my face for so long I didn't know who me was. So he was asking me, did I believe in myself? So I had to figure out who I was, I had to release that mask. And I laid there for two days in that paralyzation to the point where my bunk buddy asked me, "do I need to call the medic? Are you okay?" But my higher power would not let me move until I gave an answer. And that answer was, "yes, I believe in myself." And the response to that was, "I will not judge you by what you say, I will judge you by what you do." Because as we know, change is one of the hardest things to do in America; doesn't happen overnight, doesn't happen in a week, doesn't happen in a month. You have to grow into the change. So, there came a point where I was released from paying my debt to society and I was free. But when I entered into the community, you gotta understand that I was a convict, I was a degenerate, I was a liar, I was a thief, I was a felon. No one believed in me, because I didn't give them any reason to believe in me. But there was one thing I promised myself on that prison bed, and that was: I can, I will, and I must. And the reason behind that is because I didn't want another young man or woman to go through the pain, the headache, the heartache, and the loneliness that I just experienced. But with some of those doors being locked because of my past, it was every reason to quit, but I promised myself I wouldn't give up. So, I went to school, I went to Strayer University and I got a degree: an AA in Business Administration. Because for so long I ran a business, it was crime, it was violence, it was a business, but it wasn't a nonprofit, it wasn't a legal business. So, what I started to learn in college was some of the same principles that were actually in the drug business are the same principles that actually go with being a businessman. So after that, after I finished college in two years, it was 2006, I learned something about what was called a "nonprofit" organization. And with these dreams, with these goals, with these promises that I made to my higher power, we started our organization called "I Believe in Me, Inc." in 2016. And today, I can tell you through the whole, through the belief, through the ordinary people continuing to do extraordinary things, we are five years into our mission, we are 41 children active in our program, we are 37 children on the waiting list. So, with this community, with the mentors, with our Board of Directors, with our investors, with the grantors, the philanthropists in Frederick, I can say that we are making a difference. One day at a time. Providing hope into the lives of some that could be hopeless.

Sandy: Wow. Providing that resource for kids, for young adults, for those young men that you're working with...tell me what was it that got you thinking; "this is what I want to do"... you know,

“this is more than just me. It’s more than just I Believe in Me”? But you’re right, you have to believe in yourself, in order for you to -

Aje: - Absolutely, that’s a great question. For me, we look around at society and we see some of our young men and women are following all the wrong things: technology, rappers, athletes. When we know that one of every 2.3 million makes it to the professional level. So for me it’s about being the example, giving them something to follow, being a role model. Because in our community, they’re so rare. What we think is a role model is actually poison. What’s actually sending us in the direction to create more generational poverty rather than generational wealth for our families and communities. I like to say that we help people. There was a young man... I am blessed to be able to go into the Frederick County Adult Detention Center with Mr. Mike Folio who runs a program called Youthful Offenders, and in that program, we walk young men from our community around the jail and we show them the consequences behind their actions if they don’t fix their lives. And in that, I am able to recruit inmates from the jail to come down and speak to these young men and women about the mistakes that they’ve made in their lives. In this recruitment, I met a man by the name of Jamantres Williams, and I seen a whole bunch in him that he didn’t see in himself. I gave him a little bit of belief that he needed, that he never received, and I can tell you now that he’s home from jail. He was 17 years old when he got arrested. He was released when he was 19 years old, so he was really, truly still a kid. But I can tell you that he went back to school, he got his high school diploma. He is a paid, lead mentor. He has a son. He is a firefighter. And in his consistency of being a firefighter, we had a banquet, an event, at Mr. Brad Young’s house, and we were just celebrating some of our hope-dealing that we do. And we noticed that there was someone at the bottom of the pool and she was drowning. And Monty, this convict, this degenerate, this person that everyone threw away the key to, with all of his fire marshall clothes on, he dove into the water and he pulled her out of the water. When he pulled her out of the water, unfortunately, she was dead. But he performed CPR on the spot and brought her back to life. And when she got flown to Shock-Trauma, from Brad’s house, the doctors told her, “if you didn’t get CPR when you did, you were 2 minutes dead.” So, that’s the hope that when someone believes in someone else, can bring into the community. So, I know the ball just got rolling with me. It’s up to me to keep the fire going, for these young men and women that deserve second chances, that are not measured by the mistakes that they made.

Sandy: It’s a lot. Wow. I got chills! And it’s one thing to get a second chance, it’s another thing to take it. And to pass it along, hearing that story, yea, you know going into prison at 17, 19 coming out, I’ve spoken with other men in that same scenario that have just gone back a year later they’re back in prison. And so, they need somebody to believe in them and set them on this right path -

Aje: - “Support system”

Sandy: Yea, they need that support system.

Aje: Because oftentimes we come out here, and we are forced to go back to the same spaces and places that we know. And those places and spaces are detrimental; they're very harmful. They kind of force us into situations that we can't prevent, situations that are uncontrollable. And when we have resources, when we have people, that believe in us, it just creates an opportunity. It just gives us a reason to want to do better, because someone is dependent on me. Because sometimes we don't believe in ourselves. But it gives you more of a push when you know someone believes in you. So, watching the men and women that I work with, I often tell them, "this is never about me, this is actually about throwing the ladder down to bring you to the top as well, because more leaders creates a better community, creates a better future." So, for me, it's about, "this morning I am able to be in a room full of leaders, like yourself, that you invited me to, now I can take that knowledge back my leaders who are mentor training, and give them the things that were given unto me." So, it's just about making our community a hopeful place.

Sandy: It's the expectations and knowing that somebody expects more or better of you. And I think we all want that. I think we all want someone to believe in us and have that expectation and then we don't want to let them down.

Aje: Absolutely. Oftentimes what we do is we put a lot of responsibility on the wrong people: the Presidents of America, the Senate, the Congress. But, in my opinion, a lot of the responsibility lies with us, the people. Providing empathy helping thy neighbor, loving thy neighbor, even though we are all different, in some ways we are similar. So it's up to us to find those things and make our community better. And I can say, our organization, our mentors, our Board, the people that we're blessed to partner and work with, that's what our mission is about. Sometimes we get away from... we stray away from mission, through COVID-19 our organization, one of the first things we do at our mentor program, right when the kids came out of school, is provide a meal. Because we cannot ask these children to stimulate the brain if the stomach is growling. So, when COVID-19 hit, we started after school program via Zoom. So one of the first things the kids would say to me was when they would log on, "Mr. Aje I'm not going to school at 8 o'clock in the morning because I'm hungry. I don't have any food in the house, mom went to work." So we started 'hope boxes.' We took Poptarts, Oodles of Noodles, Mac N Cheese, Bananas, all types of fruit, so that way, at the end of the day when we got on Zoom, there was no excuse of "I was hungry." But when we were coming out of these buildings, there were lines of people saying "well, we're hungry too." And we were like, "but these are kids in our mentor program." But the lines grew and grew, and I can tell you that 18 months later, me, our team, along with Brad Young, along with Deryl White, along with a whole host of leaders in this community, we started mobile food distributions that was able to put 4.1 million meals into our community. Providing food and meals to families of over 120,000. So, when you talk about this podcast, when you talk about people coming together, when you talk about endurance, when

you talk about triumph through challenge, it was just an honor to come in and speak on a podcast like this. Because I've just witnessed and played a part in this community, standing up and blowing the trumpet through a pandemic and an emergency, and it's been an honor.

Sandy: That's awesome. This morning, when we were talking about the word 'leadership,' and what that means. The word that you said, that resonated with me was the word, 'consistency.' And, when I hear that, and then think about your mission, and how your mission had to deviate in order to provide this food and these meals and stuff, but the consistency of showing up, at the core, for these kids. I applaud you for reaching beyond, and in order to deliver for these kids you also had to stretch a little bit more, and get a lot more people involved to provide a lot more food, and then ultimately kind of stay true to your mission of working with... what did you say, 45 kids?

Aje: Yes, 41 kids. And I can say, back in the day, I called myself a dope-dealer and now I call myself a hope-dealer. So, in that hope, if we can, we like to help. Because oftentimes, my phone used to ring at crazy times in the hour of the night and I would take poison into communities. I'd take violence into communities. So, to be able to hear my phone ring and bring hope and bring joy, and bring a light, it's just a humbling feeling in itself. And allows me to make amends for some of the things that I'm not also proud of.

Sandy: I just, I feel the need to pause with that for a second because I... I don't want that to be glossed over. I want our listeners to have really heard that. And we've all done things, we've all been there, we all might not have gone to prison for it and had to pay the price that you did, but to come out of that and to figure out a way to not just help yourself, get a job, check the box. But this is your legacy. This is impacting. Ultimately, I'm assuming, it will be hundreds if not thousands, or tens of thousands, of lives directly. And then the indirect ripple effect of that is significant.

Aje: Thank you. Thank you.

Sandy: So I just... I applaud you for that and to have the drive every day to get up and to answer that call and to show a little bit of hope to somebody else. It's pretty cool.

Aje: Thank you so much. It's really important to me to be the hope for the hopeless and a voice for the voiceless. Because, sometimes, in my prayer, I ask God to go help someone as you did me because I was lost. I know what it feels like to not believe in myself. I know what it feels like to think I'm a leader, but really, I'm following all the wrong things. So, being able to surrender my bookbag full of bull crap, and fill it up with the leaders and mentors and the people that are in my life now, I couldn't ask for a better space to be in my life.

Hi, I'm Ellen Buchanan from Platinum PR and we are the sponsors of this season's Frederick Factor. Our team provides place-based marketing and communications for communities and destinations across the country. We reimagine places. Find us at www.platinumpr.com. Our contact information is in the show notes. Happy listening!

Sandy: What's your does your family think?

Aje: My mom... I can tell you, when I was in the penitentiary, my mom had three heart attacks and on the last one she almost passed away. So, now to this day, I've been home from prison for five years, and I live with my mom. And people say, "why?" You don't understand the smile that she has on our face in the morning when she wakes up, and I've already taken in the trash out. I've already washed the dishes. I've already cut the grass. All the things that she taught me that I decided not to use at the time. I was listening. And the fact that she can see that I'm there for her, it gives a different sort of "I'm proud of you, son." It gives a different sort of "no matter what you took me through I love you son." So, for me, my mom is my ultimate, my everything. And without her, it's sad to say, my life probably wouldn't change I probably would have ended up back in the penitentiary or in a cemetery. So, I give my mom all the honor.

Sandy: Did she push you to go to school to go back to school degree?

Aje: Yes, absolutely.

Sandy: Were you going in person? Or was it a virtual program?

Aje: It was virtual at Strayer.

Sandy: Okay, okay!

Aje: But then once, you know, I've been out of school I was felt like I was kind of old. I had been out of school for like 15 years. And I was like these discussions ain't working. And my mom was like, well, you need to go back to the campus. So, I ended up going back to school and getting back engaged with the professors and the students and it worked out a lot better. So, that was great advice.

Sandy: That was great advice! Well and knowing what works for different people, and to know if you could have easily given up on school absolutely and said, "forget it." But it's great that your mom was that additional push.

Aje: She's definitely been a cheerleader. [She's] more than a mom, more than a friend, more than an aunt, more than a sister, more than. Because through all my pain, I feel like I ran her over. I

didn't protect her. Love is supposed to be an action word. And I actually didn't show my mom that I loved her through my actions. I was showing her that I hated her. So now, today, I prove my love through my action.

Sandy: That's beautiful. Is she on your board? Does she volunteer with the organization?

Aje: She...we... everything... We just had our 'Mommy and Me Prom' and she was my date. 'Mommy and Me Prom' is where the kids dress up in tuxedos - I had on a tuxedo - and we get in a limousine and we go pick up mom and we take her to a candlelight dinner. Because oftentimes we think mom's day is Christmas or her birthday or Mother's Day. Well, I try to make the kids understand because of the heartache and headache I took my mom through, every day is Mother's Day. So you should treat, love, appreciate, applaud your mom every day. So, in that event, my mom was the first pick up that night to go pick up all 27 kids and their moms and go to dinner.

Sandy: What did she think?

Aje: She loves it! This is our fourth annual 'Mommy and Me Prom' and she's been to every one.

Sandy: Oh, that's great. So, shifting the conversation a little bit: I'm curious what challenges you have faced in starting this organization?

Aje: Absolutely. There are plenty of challenges. Because growing up here in Frederick County, and the hurt that I've applied to myself, and that I've applied to the community, some of those doors were not only closed, they were locked. Because people didn't actually believe that a convict, or degenerate, could actually change the narrative. But sometimes, what we don't understand is, what I have to say is what the kids want to hear. Because they think... they glorify going to jail. I can tell them that there's a whole bunch of pain in that. There's a whole bunch of suffering in that, there's a whole bunch of loss in that. So, being able to convince people within my network that I'm not the enemy, I'm actually the help. Because when I came home and I got that degree (that we're talking about from Strayer) some parents in the program started to put me on emergency contact forms for their kids. So, I could go in and have lunch, so I can go in and talk to the students. Well, once the Frederick County Public School Board got wind of my background, and me actually coming into the school to make an impact, I was banned from all Frederick County Public Schools. Not only banned not to come in and meet the kids where they were but when they had after-school basketball games, I was not allowed on school property. And that's because of my past. But because of this gracious community and one of my board members, School Board President, Brad Young, we were able to work through that. And with 7,500 signatures from community members, I was granted the authority to enter back into the Frederick County Public Schools, enter back into the extracurricular activities, and help the kids meet them directly where they are. So, 'challenges' is sometimes just how you adjust the sail

when the wind is blowing. Because it's designed for us to quit and give up. But sometimes, I have quit, but I didn't give up. I kept the fight. I kept the motivation because I have a 'why.' Sometimes, we do what we do, and we don't know why we're doing it. My 'why' is to prevent someone from feeling and going through that pain that I had to go through to learn what I've learned today. And that 'why' sticks to me because I know how painful that lifestyle is. Oftentimes, we glorify the money, the cars, the jewelry, but we never talk about the consequence that comes with it. The time that's lost serving in the consequence. And I feel like these young men and women need to hear that. Not just see what's happening on TV, or what's happening on the news, or in these communities. Someone that can bear witness to that pain.

Sandy: It's interesting; when you were telling that story, and you're right you could have just gotten frustrated and *grumbles* and complain and, you know, we all complain about the things and, you know, 'the system.' But for you to find a way to change it, and to advocate for that? My head then went to the way you have described your time in prison, which was, you know, "sentenced to 20, served all but eight." Or you said it slightly differently than that?

Aje: "20 years, all suspended but eight."

Sandy: "20 years, all suspended but eight!" So, you were there in prison for eight years?

Aje: What happened there: they gave me 20 years but they suspended all but eight. Halfway through your sentence, you get to go out for a thing called 'parole.'

Sandy: Okay.

Aje: I did three years and 11 months on the eight years that the judge offered me, and then the other four years, I had to serve on 'parole and probation' once I was released from jail. So, I had to report to the courthouse, have a therapist, urine analysis in the cup, all of those types of things. So, I did four years inside and the other four years at home on 'parole and probation.'

Sandy: And are you done with that second four yet?

Aje: Complete. Yes, ma'am.

Sandy: Oh, good for you!

Aje: I actually worked, as an intern, for my probation officer. She brings me in to talk to some of her clients, to hopefully get them from crossing the bridge. "Diversion program." So, that's a delight. I told her that I would never charge her because from where we've gone, to arguments, as

many times as I cursed her, I called her a bad person, to be able to sit next to you and help you, and you help me to be accountable is a great feeling.

Sandy: That's awesome. I mean, I think that the... the numbers and the years... I feel like you're saying it as a constant reminder. Like, at any day, like, "this is the time that I lost. And so let me do right, in the future, for what I have...for what I got back."

Aje: Absolutely. Every morning, when I wake up, I like to take a self-inventory. And in that self-inventory, I like to be sure that I'm okay with me. Because oftentimes, I'm forced to come into the community and do for others. So, if I'm not okay with who I am, the man that I woke up to be, in the purpose that I'm in, then I can't possibly help anyone else. So for me, it's about knowing who I am, looking in the mirror, and being gratified, and owning the fact that I'm Aje Hill, the hope-dealer.

Sandy: Do you get advice? Do you give advice to others that are looking to start a business? Start their own thing? "I want to be Aje now when I grow up!"

Aje: I have mentors myself; Mr. Brad Young, Mr. Paul Falls, Mr. Derek Shackle. People that keep me sane. Because, for me, if you want to be like ducks, you'll go to the pond. But if you want to fly, you'll get in the air with eagles. So, I like to be around those eagles. I like to continue to fly. I like to continue to learn. Because that gives me more fruit, for my students, for my mentors, for the board of directors. So we all can continue to grow, having partners, having other nonprofits that we can work together and align with each other, to make our community a better place. And through this COVID, I've been able to witness endurance and people coming together; people may have different missions, but finding a way to work alongside one another. And that just breeds so much hope for community, for our young people, and for businesses. People that are trying to thrive! Because if there's one thing I love to do, it's to help businesses have a hopeful spirit, bringing [them] energy, bringing in motivation. So for me, and my hope-dealer stance, whatever... whatever it takes to make Frederick that magical community that you describe.

Sandy: If somebody wanted help, maybe they have a child, and they don't know what to do. How can they reach out to you? How can they get on that waiting list?

Aje: Absolutely. If someone would need help, and we like to say 'waiting lists,' but sometimes tomorrow is too late. Sometimes the situation requires now. And we are understanding of that. So, all referrals are taken differently. But we do have a website: www.ibelieveinme.com is our website. It's real easy to remember because you must believe in yourself before you can go to help or believe in anyone else. So, "ibelieveinme.com," there's a portion in the website that says 'about us.' And it's a drop-down bar that comes up and you can send your information to become

a volunteer, you can send your information to participate in some of the events we have upcoming, or you can send information about a referral of your child or someone that you know that could benefit from our hope-dealing services.

Sandy: That's great. Thank you. Thank you. What would you like to see here in Frederick that could make things more supportive for I Believe in Me?

Aje: I would like to see more safe spaces. Oftentimes, the juvenile delinquency rate of crime goes up from Thursday to Sunday. But what I like to do as a leader is see what stake I have in that, see how I can help that number decrease rather than increase. And as we look around, we don't see many buildings around where a kid can just come into and get love, get hope, get education, get a meal, without having a tuition, without having to pay some type of 'down payment' for their future. I'm trying to find that place where just them believing in themselves is a passport into their future. So, I can say one thing that I'm definitely saying we are lacking right now is safe spaces for our youth because our youth are our tomorrow.

Sandy: This is so true. And we say it, we use that phrase, the.. you know, "the youth of today are going to be running tomorrow" and stuff, but what are we doing to really help them?

Aje: Absolutely,

Sandy: We need to just stop talking about it and do something about it.

Aje: I agree.

Sandy: And I applaud you for what you're doing. My head is spinning in terms of things that I could and should be doing, you know? My life has changed recently, you know, I've had lots of lots of things going on. But I'm at a place now where I need to be giving back. I need to be doing more. And so figuring out exactly what that looks like, we'll see. Anything else that you'd like to share with your audience before I ask our final question for the day?

Aje: For me, I mean, if you want to do something great, you can never do it alone. Oftentimes, I tell people, this is a marathon. So, always plan on walking, because if I run, I may get tired. But I'm able to walk because of extraordinary people in this community, that give abundances of support: Delaplaine Foundation, Second Street and Hope, Community Foundation, Damascus Road Community Church, I mean, the list is endless of people that continue to pour hope and belief into this organization. So, I will say together we'll be great, alone we'll do little. So let's stick together. Let's stay committed to our future, not by what we say, by what we do. The world deserves, and the world needs a little bit of empathy, and it should come from us.

Sandy: “Together we'll do great, alone we'll do little.” I love that! So wrapping up this Frederick Factor podcast, I need to ask, Aje, what is your Frederick factor?

Aje: My Frederick factor is easy. It's the love. It's the togetherness. It's how we bond together in situations that may seem of challenge, and in that challenge, we create avenues of hope and success. So it's a pleasure and an honor being a part of the Frederick Factor and being able to be able to make an impact in this community.

Sandy: I thank you. Thank you. That's all I can say. Thank you for being here.

Aje: Thank you!

Sandy: This has been awesome. I've really enjoyed it. And I hope that others will, you know, who have enjoyed this conversation will check out your website: ibelieveinme.com and tune in for our next episode of The Frederick Factor. Until then!

Sandy: **You've been listening to the Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community and what makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at www.FrederickFactor.com. You can also connect with us on Instagram and Facebook. 'Til next time!**