

# Post-pandemic, D.C. motivational speaker focuses on coming back

Former D.C. schools official Willie Jolley is keeping them smiling



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Feeling rather uninspired lately, I went to hear Willie Jolley, a D.C. native who has made it big as a professional motivational speaker. He'll be at Emory Fellowship in Northwest Washington for the next two Saturday nights, fine-tuning his new one-man "Broadway-style" show.

I found the theme intriguing: "A setback is just a setup for a comeback."

The pandemic had certainly caused its share of setbacks — at work, in eating habits and exercise routines, in finances and relationships. Even when there had been a "comeback," in one area or another, something still seemed to be missing. Nothing felt quite the same.

Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy had warned in May about a “crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country.” Jolley said the show was his way of doing something about that crisis.

“I said something needs to be done, and what I can do is to encourage and inspire people,” Jolley told the audience. “My goal for you today is for you to smile. You will leave here smiling.”

I had no idea how a motivational speech works. Or whether this one would work at all. I had met Jolley back in the early 1990s, when he was employed by D.C. Public Schools as a drug-prevention counselor. He would travel from school to school giving pep talks about staying in school and away from drugs.

I knew that he had been a nightclub singer in D.C., and had a knack for using music and stories to quiet auditoriums filled with rowdy school kids. During that decade, when crack-cocaine-related homicides soared to record highs, Jolley was addressing students at three and sometimes four schools a day — not just in D.C. but throughout the region.

Teachers began listening in and then started inviting him to speak at teacher conferences. At one of those gatherings, he met Les Brown, a motivational speaker who was touring with singers Gladys Knight and Billy Preston. Brown invited Jolley to join as a warm-up speaker. Before long, Jolley was giving motivational speeches at corporations such as Ford, GM, Walmart and Coca-Cola. In 1999, Toastmasters International, a nonprofit that promotes public speaking and leadership, named him one of the top five speakers of the year.

In January, President Biden honored him with a lifetime achievement award for public service.

“Anybody ever have a setback?” Jolley asked the crowd at the recent event.

Heads nodded; hands were raised.

“Any of you have children — teenagers?” More nods, more hands. Plus laughter.

The thrust of his message was about maintaining a good attitude — and defeating “dream busters” such as negative thinking. But he had learned the lessons as a result of experiencing setbacks. One in particular stands out:

As a nightclub singer in the 1980s and early '90s, Jolley worked out of a hotel in D.C. and won Washington Area Music Awards, also known as “the Wammies,” five years in a row.

“The club would sell out, standing room only, every night,” Jolley recalled. “I bought a house, a nice sports car. I was on top of the world.”

Until the club owner informed him that he was being replaced by a karaoke machine. He was told the machine was cheaper than live entertainment and brought in just as many customers.

“I was devastated,” Jolley recalled. “I was at the top of the profession in D.C., and suddenly I’m out, with no way to pay my bills.” After begging to keep his job, he learned the first hard truth: “Nobody cares about you and your bills except you and the bill collector,” he said.

“I didn’t get out of bed for a week,” Jolley continued. “I didn’t want to eat. I was depressed, despondent. I wasn’t quite suicidal but not far from it. Then, one Sunday morning, my wife said, ‘Let’s go to church,’ the one that I attended growing up in D.C.” He reluctantly went. And when the pastor saw Jolley, he called him down front and asked him to sing a song like he used to do when he attended church more frequently.

It was a gospel song called “God Is.”

Jolley didn’t just tell his story that night at Emory Fellowship, he acted it out. Complete with music and singing and even partial change of wardrobe — from night club singer in black jacket and beret to gospel singer in white suit.

He began the song tentatively, as if his vocal cords had been rusted by absence from the church. But he ended strong, his spiritual muscle memory kicking in, causing some in the audience to stand, sing along, wave hands, tear up and clap.

“When I sang that song, something inside me changed,” Jolley told the audience. “Then the preacher said, ‘I’ve been praying for you.’ Prayer does change things. Sometimes it changes the situation, but sometimes it changes you. It can move mountains but also give you the strength to climb that mountain.”

“Amen,” someone in the audience shouted, obviously convinced.

Soon after that day in church, Jolley found the job with D.C. Public Schools — the one that would lead him to become a nationally known motivational speaker.

“Speaking did not come easily,” he hastened to add. “One day, a guy who attended junior high with me said: ‘Willie, how did you get smart? Because you were in the dummy part of the class when we were in school.’ I made a decision to work on myself. I realized that I had a desire to inspire. So, I read books. I took classes in communication. I’d ride around in my car listening to grammar audio cassette tapes, working on eliminating the ‘ahhs,’ ‘umms’ and ‘you knows’ from my speech.”

After graduating from Theodore Roosevelt High in Ward 4, he earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from American University, then a masters in theology from the Wesley Theological Seminary and a doctorate in ministry.

He thought he would become a pastor, but “I never heard the call,” he said.

What he became instead was an inspiration — a D.C. kid turned motivational speaker, helping troubled youngsters, inmates, the unhoused; writing books and hosting a top-rated self-help talk show on Sirius XM radio.

“Overcome self-limiting beliefs,” he advised the audience. “Stop hanging out with negative, small-minded, petty people. Who you hang out with, that’s who you will become, good or bad. Hang out with nine losers, you’ll be Number 10.”

At age 67, he puts special emphasis on not letting age stop you from living your dreams. “You’ve got far too many people talking about ‘I’m too old, my ship has passed,’” he said. “Then there are the ones who say, ‘The older I get the smaller my world becomes.’ I say they are right because that is their thinking. You think you can, or you think you can’t. Either way, you are right.”

He ended the show with a soaring rendition of “The Impossible Dream.” Some joined in, the rapturous look on their faces testament to the therapeutic value of a song sung together. And we departed just as Jolley had said: smiling.