

**Testimony of Chris “Kazi” Rolle
Creator of Art Start’s Hip-Hop Project
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities**

I was born in a little Island called Nassau in the Bahamas. My mother was a Jamaican immigrant who was trying to get to America via the Bahamas , due the fact there were less obstacles for Bahamians seeking to come to United States than there were for people coming from here country.

At 6months old, my mother left me in the care of friends to venture to the United States in hopes of opportunity. She had left three kids before with my grandmother in Jamaica. She never returned for me. In 1980, the Bahamian Department of Social Services substantiated reports that I was living in an abusive situation. At four years old, I was found wandering in the streets of and was subsequently institutionalized at the Children's Emergency Hostel for orphans.

Catherine Brown, a social worker at the hostel, developed a relationship with me and in 1982, I was fostered by here and her family. The adjustment was very difficult – they said that I presented numerous behavioral problems at home and in school, as I could not understand how strangers could love me when my own mother abandoned him. Thank fully Mrs. Brown trucked on. I was officially adopted on November 4th 1988.

I still got into a lot of trouble and posed ongoing challenges. Due to lack of the proper resource to help me with my emotional issues, the family came their wits end in dealing with me. In 1990, I was placed in the Ranfurly Home for Children. While in the Ranfurly Home, I was placed in a psychiatric ward for unruly children. It was determined by the Department of Social Services that my challenges were directly related to my early childhood experiences - as a result, the American Embassy was contacted to locate my biological mother and on December 21, 1990, reunited with her in New York City, USA.

From 1990 - 1992, I's relationship with my biological mother was highly tumultuous. By 1992, at age 16, I found himself homeless once again, on the streets of New York City. From 1992 - 1994, Wherever I laid my head was my home. Gangs were my family. Warm train station was my apartment. Street Pharmaceutical Corporations became was my employers. Five discount was how I shopped for clothing. It was all bout survival. I found my self incarcerated numerous time. I was on a road to nowhere. All the people who said that I wouldn't amount to nothing were being proved right.

In 1994, at age 18, I finally decided to get my life together. I enrolled in Public School Repertory Company, a "last chance" performing arts high school and I discovered that I had a passion for music and theatre, and realized the power of the arts as an outlet for healing. I wrote a play based on my life story called a Brooklyn Story.

At Public School Repertory, I connected with Art Start - an arts-based youth organization he also began writing, directing and acting for the award winning urban theater company, Tomorrow's Future. My play, A Brooklyn Story, earned me a New York Governor's Citation and a Martin Luther King, Jr. Award. In 1995, I received the CBS Fulfilling the Dream Award for my play and my work in schools and homeless shelters advocating education and drug abuse prevention.

In 1999, having personally experienced the healing power of the arts, I chose to dedicate my life to providing a similar outlet for under-served youth. I created The Hip Hop Project, an award-winning program that connects New York City teens to music industry professionals to write, produce and market their own compilation album on youth issues. The program attracted Russell Simmons and Bruce Willis, whose support contributed largely the success of the program. In 2000 I was featured on the Oprah Winfrey Show in a segment called People Who Are Using Their Lives. In 2005 he passed the torch of leadership of the Hip Hop Project one of my students, and joined the organization's Board of Trustees.

I say all of this to say that I was that kid. Homeless. No where to go. Pocket had rabbit ears. I had nothing. I was at the bottom. Rock bottom. Being homeless. Not have a family. Not having resources, influenced my choices. If no one was there to give it to me, I am going to have to take it. Steal it. Whatever. By any means necessary. You feel me?

We need more support for the programs like Art Start, Tomorrow's Future theater group, The Hip Hop Project and all of the wonderful people who take their time to help people like myself.

We also need to get the word out in a big way to caring community members, parents, and young people themselves that millions of youth experience homelessness in the United States each year. All of the step and extend family members who step up to the plate, they need all the support, resources and services available to assist them. These programs, families and those working to bring about awareness desperately need federal funding, cause these are expensive undertakings. Every youth in the nation deserves a place to call home.