DERRYCK FLETCHER

Age: 33

Title: Senior vice president of youth development, Y in Central Maryland

Education: Certified public manager program, University of Baltimore

Back in the mid 2000s, Derryck Fletcher was working for a large bank.

He had taken some vacation time to volunteer at a camp focused on leadership development — a camp he had attended while in high school. Exhausted after it was over, Fletcher called his mother to help him stay awake on his drive home.

"I said, 'Mom, when I get back to work on Monday, I'm going to have to quit the bank,'" Fletcher said.

His response to his mother's obvious question of why?

"Because I forgot what it felt like to change lives," he said.

Fletcher took a few months to figure out what exactly came next and landed on youth development — a path that would eventually lead to his current job as senior vice president of youth development at the Y in Central Maryland. There he oversees strategic and operational direction of programs impacting more than 11,000 children — many from economically and socially distressed neighborhoods. He has a reputation as an inspiring speaker and serves on several boards including the National AfterSchool Association, Leadership Maryland and the Redeemed Family Life Center.

Much of what you do now is big picture. How do you make sure that what you're doing at that level is meeting the needs of individual children? After a few years of front line work, I realized I couldn't do what I really wanted to do at that micro level. That work is really important, and we need those folks to ensure no young person falls through the cracks. But what gets me up every morning is trying to disrupt systems that have perpetuated the cycles of poverty and lack of opportunity for our young people.

You see a lot of struggles in your line of work. How do you keep yourself from becoming overwhelmed? I see the struggle. But I also see the resilience. While I realize that I don't have all of the answers, I also realize the families we serve don't need a handout. What they need is someone or someones who occupy places of influence to ensure they have equitable access to opportunity. I don't see my job as saving that young person or saving a family. I see my job as unlocking doors to equitable opportunity.

Did you have one mentor growing up who set you on your current path? I am a definitely a product of the African proverb that it takes a village. I was so incredibly blessed to have a wonderful village that helped me. My parents got pregnant with me when they were in high school and my father spent much of my time growing up in and out of incarceration. He developed an opioid addiction while he was incarcerated. And actually my father passed away a little more than a year ago from a fentanyl overdose. And when I think about everything I do professionally? When I think about adverse childhood experiences and effects of addiction on a family? Every odd should have been stacked against me. But I had this incredible village. My mom was supported by people who loved her. She had the emotional and financial support of my grandparents who ensured that we were never hungry and that all of my needs were met. There was a wonderful community of relatives and non-relatives who ensured that my mother and I had everything necessary to give me every opportunity that the odds say that I shouldn't have had.

Do you speak Gen Z? No. I don't. Well, as a youth development professional, I do speak. As an employer? I'm just now realizing that I wasn't prepared for them.

What's the quickest way to alienate a member of their generation? Not listening. One of the things that I respect about them is that these young people — not only do they have thoughts and insights — but they have an innate need to share them. They don't feel like they need to earn the right to add voice to their truth. They don't feel like they have to have a certain amount of longevity or tenure in order to pull up a seat to the table. They see that seat at the table as their civil right. Being dismissive of that is the quickest way to alienate them.

— *Rebecca Logan*