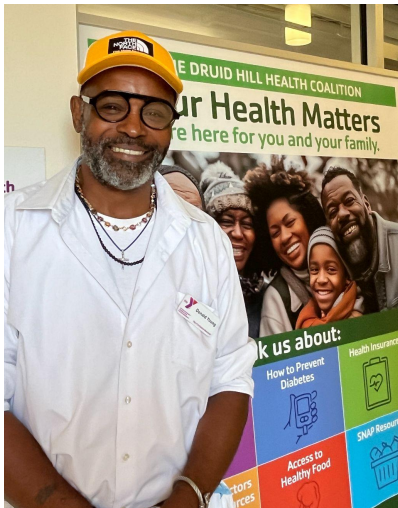




“THEY TRUST ME BECAUSE OF MY LIVED EXPERIENCE.”



Donald Young, Y Associate and Member

Talking to Y associate Donald Young is like slowly peeling back the layers of an onion. His history is confronting. Growing up in West Baltimore, Donald often felt like he didn't fit in. He couldn't wait to finish high school and experience the real world.

“After school, I went right into the Navy where I learned that there was more out there than Park Heights. I also realized the pain was the same. So in those travels I learned that I wanted to help people, but then I came home and became a drug addict.”

When asked how it all unravelled, Donald reflects:

“I felt different and this insecurity led me to want to fit in so I fell into what everyone around me was doing. With heroin, it is a physical addiction. And it was so available in my community. It was right there. Just like Tylenol.”

Donald got clean in 2009 but relapsed on the day of his mother's funeral in 2016. He lost her to a fentanyl overdose. His mother was undeniably very special to him.

“She instilled in me a thirst for knowledge. With two master's degrees from Morgan State University in psychology and sociology, our home was filled with books. She loved Salman Rushdie. We read *Catcher in the Rye* together. She loved the theatre. She could sing. I have a CD with her voice on it. I listen to that a lot.”

In 2017, Donald faced a near-fatal overdose that marked a pivotal shift in his life.

“At that moment, I felt my mother and grandparents with me. It was as if a higher power called my name. I went downstairs to my partner and told him I needed treatment. From that day on, I never used again.”

Fast forward to 2025, and Donald now supervises a team of Community Health workers at the Y in Druid Hill, where he connects neighbors to vital resources and opportunities that enhance their quality of life. His own journey allows him to empathize deeply with those he serves.

"When someone comes to the Community Health team for help, we immediately triage what the needs are through a thorough assessment process. My team never gives knee-jerk reactions or responses. We want people to know that we are giving deliberate thought when we come up with a resource plan."

From housing instability to substance abuse to the need for food and child care, Donald sees it all and does his best to provide a road map for support and access, similar to what was provided to him.

"They trust me because of my lived experience. I still live in their community. I am the block captain of the 1600 block of Druid Hill. I'm right there with them when the cable goes out because mine does too."

Donald came to the Y after working as a Community Outreach Engagement Specialist at Johns Hopkins University. The Y is clearly incredibly lucky to be able to access expertise and draw learnings from his lived experience.

"Obviously this experience came with a whole bunch of bumps and bruises and trips. I realize that I was part of the problem. I was adding logs to the fire.

Now, at the Y, Donald says, **"I stand on the other side, equipped with full protective gear, a fire extinguisher, a hose, and an oxygen tank. Together, I want to help put out this fire."**