

## A Conversation with Rodney D. Bullard, Author of *Heroes Wanted*

***Q. First of all, congratulations on the book. *Heroes Wanted* is inspiring and pragmatic. Have you always wanted to write a book?***

**A.** I have always wanted to write a book. My interest in writing really intensified over the last couple of years, though, as I watched my friends author great books. For example, Eric Greitens, who is the Governor of Missouri, has written a number of bestselling books—*Heart and Fist* is one of them. Just watching Eric go through that process rekindled my interest and inspired me to use books as a medium to inspire other people. I always thought I could use other ways, like speaking and work. But I think this opened my eyes to how powerful books still are.

***Q. *Heroes Wanted* is full of stories—some well known and public, some personal and mostly unknown until now. The stories from your own life are some of the best pieces of the book. There is one about you learning to read that is especially impactful. Many people who see your résumé will not expect a story about you struggling to learn to read as a child. Why was it important to include?***

**A.** I think the story is particularly important for this book because one of the central tenets of *Heroes Wanted* is that you don't have to be super to be a hero. We all have vulnerabilities. We have all fallen and had challenges. Those difficulties give us the empathy that will allow us to be somebody else's hero.

My teacher Mrs. Adams believed in me and took so much extra time to work with me until it clicked. The story is for kids like me who I know are out there—kids who have difficulty for one reason or another. Mine was probably just rooted in anxiety and youth.

There are kids out there who, if it weren't for a Mrs. Adams, would not get the opportunity to be their best selves, their full selves. Acknowledging both the kids and the heroes like Mrs. Adams is equally important, and I think me offering my own vulnerability there is quintessential to the book conveying that message.

***Q. You'll empower a lot of people with that story. After those early challenges, you excelled—you decided to go to the U.S. Air Force Academy. What was making that choice like?***

**A.** That was a very difficult choice. One, it was a long way from Atlanta, which is home. As my grandmother said, "Baby, I know there are a lot of colleges between Atlanta and Colorado. I don't know why you have to go so far."

It was hard to leave. It was also a climate change. We just had a snow here in Atlanta, and it made me think back to my first snow in Colorado. I looked up and said, “Are we going to school in this?” (laughs) They said, “Yes, son, we’re going to school. This is Colorado.”

I chose the Air Force Academy because of what I saw when I looked at the school objectively. I wanted a school that was different than just a regular education. I already had an interest at the time in leadership—an interest I still have. The football coaches and faculty I met there really couched it as a leadership opportunity—a leadership lab.

I was also interested in playing college football, and the Air Force Academy has a great college football program. I knew I wanted to be a lawyer, and they had a mock trial team that was right up my alley. I’d done football and mock trial in high school and had done well in both.

At the end of the day, attending the Air Force Academy was a challenge. I wanted to see whether or not I could actually rise to that challenge. Ultimately, I found was that the challenge wasn’t really individual. I found that leadership and challenges are best approached when there is a partnership, a group effort. I got through the Air Force Academy because of my friends, my colleagues, mentors, and faculty, who all became part of my village, of my group effort. Lots of people were part of my journey there.

Often times, we think of leadership and being a hero as a solo effort, when really it is about all of us pulling together. A friend of mine recently told me that often, we have it backwards. We are looking for a single hero, but it takes millions of us to save millions. If I find someone to help, and you find someone to help, and others each find someone, that’s how we change things.

***Q. That reminds me of Chapter 6 in the book, when you’re talking about community. You write about how everybody has a leadership responsibility in the community. I’ve never heard somebody put it quite that way. What does a community of leaders look like ?***

***A.*** We all have a role to play in ensuring that our community is strong and able—and that no one is left behind. We all have gifts to give. My gift is different than your gift, but that doesn’t make it any less a gift. Each of us has to find and understand what our gifts are, and then use them in the community.

There is another important point to make. Most people would characterize the work we do here at the Chick-fil-A Foundation as charity or philanthropy, giving money away. But we see it as leadership. It is the opportunity to bring people

together, which is a leadership function, and anybody in any community can do that.

We have an opportunity to recognize people who have been forgotten or who have fallen through the cracks. Anybody and everybody can do that. I can recognize the person who's holding the door. I can recognize the person who takes my change. I can recognize everybody and give them dignity, respect, and honor.

At the Chick-fil-A Foundation, we see what we do as solving hard problems. That means first acknowledging that there is such a thing as children who don't know where their next meal is coming from, as well as children who aren't getting a great education. Then, how can we solve those problems?

If we're solving those problems of our community and our city, that's not charity. That's leadership.

***Q. We'll talk more about the work you're doing at Chick-fil-A, but before we get there, let's talk for a moment about your parents, who will inspire other parents reading this book. What is the most important lesson you learned from your mom, and the most important lesson you learned from your dad?***

***A.*** I do have great parents—that is the greatest blessing of my life.

From my father, I learned to take care of other people. My father was really big on being intentional and recognizing and supporting and loving others. He is a pastor, and a big teddy bear of a guy.

From my mother, I learned the importance of nurture. It's important that we get great educations and great opportunities, but nurture really goes toward a person's confidence and psyche—all of those things that undergird everything else. I know people who are extremely well educated but aren't well adjusted. That's where nurture comes in. Nurturing doesn't mean giving your child everything—my parents didn't have everything to give me. It doesn't mean you don't correct your child. In fact, part of nurturing is correcting your child, setting them on the right path. It doesn't mean that you set the child up as a little emperor and tell them they can't fail. But it does mean that you nurture them when they do fall. You pick them up.

***Q. One of the book's best anecdotes describes the moment you applied to become a White House Fellow—an elite position you got—and a woman fielding applications discouraged you and told you the role was really just for super stars. What do you hope others get from this story?***

**A.** I shared that story because you're the owner of your dreams. Other people will inevitably be skeptical of your dreams—they'll always tell you you can't do something for whatever reason. For me, my size, my color, where I came from, whatever—all of these things cause some people to have preconceived notions about me.

Well, we should not be limited by someone else's perceptions, which we cannot change. I can make all the money in the world and dress in a certain way, and people are still going to have ideas about me that I can't change. There's nothing I can do about it.

Part of being a hero is having the courage to recognize that I don't need people to co-sign on my heroism, dreams, ability to help someone else, or ability to do what I know God has ordained me to do.

***Q. There was a crime committed by some young men in Decatur, Georgia, that really affected you when you were an Assistant U.S. Attorney. What was it about this case that touched you?***

**A.** That case was one of the last cases I tried at the U.S. Attorney's Office. It wasn't a trial—it was a guilty plea.

It particularly impacted me because those kids were from my neighborhood. They were kids, but they were tried as grown men. They were young, though. And it was so apparent that they had all the things foundationally that you would want a kid to have, but other things—whether it be circumstances, friends, peer pressure, whatever—those things were off.

I think a lot about that. There are churches that say, "We want to go spread the gospel in this poor neighborhood." Well, I am not trying to say that that neighborhood doesn't need the gospel. We all do, rich and poor. But most likely, somebody has already shared the gospel there, and they have an innate sense of good, of right and wrong.

That sense was on full display in this case. These kids took the time to help this old lady and take her bags out of her car that they were stealing. They set her bags by her on the side of the road. The time they spent doing that was part of the reason they got caught. They probably would have been caught eventually anyway, but because they slowed down to help her, they were caught quickly.

It just showed there was good in them, and that there is always something to build on. What it really taught me was that we can't throw people away. We make different mistakes, but we all make mistakes. We have to have grace and look to help people, to rehabilitate them.

***Q. It's such an important reminder. With your experience, you could have done a lot of things—being a judge comes to mind. Why did you decide to join Chick-fil-A?***

**A.** I was blessed to have the opportunity to be here at Chick-fil-A. I truly believe that God brought me here, that I was directed here. I got a chance to meet CEO Dan Cathy, and that was serendipity—I didn't seek it out.

I'm honored to be here because of what Chick-fil-A stands for: a successful business that is purposeful. A law school professor told me a long time ago that you have to look for a place where you can do good and do well.

I think that's important. It's like what they tell you on an airplane: in the case of an emergency, put your mask on first then put on someone else's mask. You have to take care of yourself, or you won't have the capacity to take care of others.

I don't know any company that leverages its privilege to help others better than Chick-fil-A. It's a blessing to be here helping with that—to be able to do good and do well.

***Q. You just touched on this earlier: what issues do you see now in the community, and what is Chick-fil-A doing to help?***

**A.** I see a number of issues in the community. One issue is the people who are living in the shadows of prosperity and have been forgotten. Those children, women, and men are not growing and prospering at the same rate as many of those around them. They've been left behind. I see it in rural and urban America, in black, white, and Hispanic. I see it in Chicago, Charlotte, Atlanta, Los Angeles.

That is something we can do something about. Consider a community like ours in Atlanta that has all of these Fortune 500 companies headquartered here: Coca-Cola, Home Depot, Waffle House, Chick-fil-A, Delta, UPS—the list goes on and on. With all of that largesse, you can do something about these problems. It's a matter of partnership, of coming together.

I'm excited about the work going on here in Atlanta that Chick-fil-A is a part of. We haven't solved the problem—we're a long way from it. But we are working on it together.

I also think about the division that seems to define this age. We are so much stronger together. I hope we can continue to work on that. I hope this book inspires people to reach out across difference and find commonalities that enable us to help somebody else.

**Q. *Heroes Wanted* outlines nine components of heroism: calling, commitment, compassion, connection, conviction, community, courage, charity, and confidence. How did you choose these?**

**A.** I think they are the components that people struggle with. At some point, everybody is going to struggle with courage. Some may struggle with commitment. These are all things that people use as excuses to not act—even if they don't articulate it, the fear or difficulty is there, in their heart, lurking under the surface.

I tackled all of them because I didn't want a reader to finish the book and think, "I still can't make a difference." I want them to think, "I can."

**Q. *You've started a social media campaign encouraging everyone to share their everyday hero stories, haven't you?***

**A.** Yes, we are. We are asking people to share their stories and to tag them with #HeroismOnDisplay.

We all have heroes. Whenever I tell the story of Mrs. Adams, someone typically responds, "Yeah! I had Mr. or Mrs. Such-and-Such." It's important that we recognize those folks. It's important because we need to show them gratitude, but we also just need to show that those folks exist. Their work will inspire us all. We can all be those folks for somebody else.

**Q. *Most people want to help their community but don't know where to start. What do you tell them?***

**A.** You start by being a friend. You don't have to do anything special or be anybody special. You don't even have to physically go out of your way. Just start by being a friend. There is a story in the book about the three-foot rule and Fearless Dialogues founder Greg Ellison that boils down to this: start with the people in the three feet around you.

You can start by just connecting with someone you see at Chick-fil-A or someone you see at school whose name you don't know. Maybe it's someone you see at work that you pass by—maybe their job is different than yours.

Reach out to them. Recognize them.

**Q. *If readers have just one big takeaway from Heroes Wanted, what you do hope it is?***

**A.** I hope readers walk away with a sense of duty and responsibility, and the confidence that they can be a positive influence on somebody else, not just in a broad fashion, but in a specific, personal, intimate way.

You don't just have the ability to do that—it's your responsibility. If we all reach out to those around us, one by one, our communities will all get better. All boats rise, you know. That's how we get to where we want to be.

**About Rodney Bullard**

Rodney D. Bullard has spent his prolific career serving others. A U.S. Air Force veteran, Rodney currently serves as the vice president of community affairs at Chick-fil-A Inc. and as the executive director of the Chick-fil-A Foundation. Prior to joining Chick-fil-A, Rodney was an assistant U.S. attorney general and a White House Fellow at NASA. At Chick-fil-A, he led the start-up of the organization's operational corporate foundation where he directs community affairs, philanthropy and community services. Rodney lives in Atlanta with his wife and son. His first book, HEROES WANTED: Why the World Needs You to Live Your Heart Out, is available February 20. For more information, please visit [RodneyBullard.com](http://RodneyBullard.com).