

James Banks

Transforming Lives Through Mentorship, Education, Healing,
Compassion, and a Lifelong Commitment to Service, Justice, and
Love!

Sean Wright

Professor James Banks, known throughout Suffolk County Community College and beyond as “Dr. Love,” has spent his life in service—to education, to healing, and to humanity. A Marine veteran, counselor, educator, and musician, Jim has poured decades of wisdom into students, clients, and communities. His guiding principle is simple but profound: love changes lives.

Whether he’s mentoring young men through My Brother’s Keeper, helping police departments understand the communities they serve, or encouraging students who’ve been overlooked, Jim’s message never wavers. Love, he says, is the foundation of transformation.

I began our conversation by recalling the first image I had of him.

“I used to know you as the man with the kufi and the thick mustache. I’ve seen you everywhere, but I never knew all this.”

“My look has changed,” he replied.

I laughed and said, “So has mine.”

He told me he grew up in the South Bronx, one of six boys raised by a single mother.

“We didn’t have much, but we had each other,” Jim said. That closeness, he explained, taught him early on about community, sacrifice, and strength.

I asked when he began to grasp the deeper realities of poverty.

He took a moment. “I thought I understood it,” he said. “But it wasn’t until Vietnam that I saw how far it can reach. I witnessed people suffering in ways I couldn’t imagine. It shifted something inside me. That experience never left me.”

After the military, I wondered if he immediately pursued a path in education.

“Not quite,” he said with a light tone. “I went into music first. I performed at the Apollo with an R&B group called The Exclusives. I sang bass and baritone—sometimes lead, depending on the song.”

When I asked about his musical influences, he said there were too many to name. He also mentioned that he wrote songs. “A few of the titles I remember were ‘Heard It Through the Grapevine,’ ‘They Can’t Slick the Slicker,’ and ‘I’ll Never Fall in Love



Again.’ We recorded them, but over the years, I’ve lost the tracks with all the moving I’ve done.”

He paused before adding, “Music taught me that people respond to connection. Whether it’s through a melody or a kind word, it reaches people. That lesson stuck with me.”

After college, Jim worked for Berkshire Farms and Services for Youth. That job became a turning point and led him to pursue a graduate degree in social work. He later opened a private practice in Patchogue, New York, and began teaching at Dowling College. Eventually, he joined Suffolk County Community College.

“That’s where the nickname started,” he said. “Students began calling me ‘Dr. Love’ because I talked so much about compassion, healing, and justice. I didn’t plan it, but it stayed.”

I asked what fuels his passion for helping people heal.

“For over 40 years, I’ve had a psychotherapy practice in Patchogue,” Jim said. “I also practice clinical hypnosis. It’s not about controlling anyone—it’s about helping people shift behaviors, release fear, and recognize their own strength.”

I asked how that individual healing ties into his work in the community.

“Healing isn’t just personal—it’s collective,” he said. “That’s why I stay involved with groups like the Southampton Anti-Bias Task Force and the African American Advisory Board. The goal is the same: create spaces where people feel seen and valued.”

We talked about global awareness and how that plays into his mission.

“Uganda is beautiful, diverse, and deeply courageous,” he said. “So is Haiti. When you learn about people outside your own backyard, it opens you up. It teaches empathy. It helps us grow into better human beings.”

I asked who inspires him in that global work.

Without missing a beat, he said, “Chuck Ormsby and Father Joseph Ssergo.”

He continued, “Chuck is someone I’ve just learned about through you, Sean, but I respect him deeply. He could be doing anything, but he chose to build something lasting. He didn’t just donate—he committed. He called others in. That’s leadership.”

I asked what Chuck’s work means to him on a personal level.

“He’s creating real opportunities,” Jim said. “Education, healthcare, dignity—he’s building futures. That’s love in action.”

Then I brought up Father Joseph.

“Father Joseph is a spiritual giant,” he said. “He doesn’t need a microphone. His presence alone teaches. He mentors young people and lives with integrity and humility. That’s something we don’t see enough of.”

Jim paused, then added, “Chuck and Father Joseph don’t lead from a distance. They walk with the people. That’s why what they do is so impactful.”

We talked about Stand Up to Poverty and his work with the organization. I asked what keeps him connected to causes like that and his work in Haiti.

“It’s all one story,” he replied. “Uganda, Haiti, Long Island. Different languages, different customs—but the same dreams. The same human hopes.”

To learn more, visit standuptopoverty.org. In his classroom, he brings those lessons to life every day.

“I tell my students, your zip code doesn’t define your destiny,” Jim said. “If I were speaking to students in Uganda, I’d say the same thing. Know your worth. Sharpen your gifts. And always help someone else rise with you.”

I asked how he keeps going after years of health struggles and a heart transplant.

“Life teaches us to keep going,” he said.

“Even when it’s hard. Especially then.”

Jim beams when he talks about his children. His son, Cristopher James Banks—CJ—is the Vice President of Career Advancement and Strategic Partnerships at Villa Maria College in Buffalo. His daughter, Monique Renee Rathbun, runs a successful small business in Texas. His youngest son, Daryl Jason Banks, and Daryl’s wife operate their own thriving business in Florida.

“They’re my heart,” Jim said. “Everything my mother gave to me, I tried to give to them.”

As our conversation wrapped up, I shared something I hadn’t said before.

“You’re not just Dr. Love. You’re living proof that faith, education, and compassion can rebuild even what’s been broken.”

There was a pause before Jim replied.

“We may not control the world,” he said, “but we can always choose to love in it.”

That one line stayed with me.

In a world full of division, noise, and distraction, Jim Banks chooses connection.

He chooses healing. He chooses love.

While Jim doesn’t affiliate with a particular religious denomination, he does believe in God and has very strong faith.

It’s a faith rooted in service, compassion, and the enduring belief that people can change—and so can the world.

His work is a living echo of something Fannie Lou Hamer once said:

“There is one thing you have got to learn about our movement. Three people are better than no people.”

Jim Banks reminds us that love isn’t soft. It’s not abstract. It’s the work of showing up, again and again, for others and for ourselves. It’s what he’s taught his students, his clients, and his children.

It’s what he teaches us all.

To explore more about Jim’s work, visit **jameswbanks.com**.



