

# Area Student Shows Plenty Of Heart

## U.C. Davis' Matthew Culberson Tackles Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Following Challenging Upbringing

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His future wasn't always as bright as it is now, but UC Davis sophomore Matthew Culberson is a shining example of how hard work and determination can change one's outlook and life trajectory. Culberson, 19, is on a path to graduate from UC Davis with not one, but two degrees in academically rigorous subjects: Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. His goal is to become a doctor, scientist and science teacher.

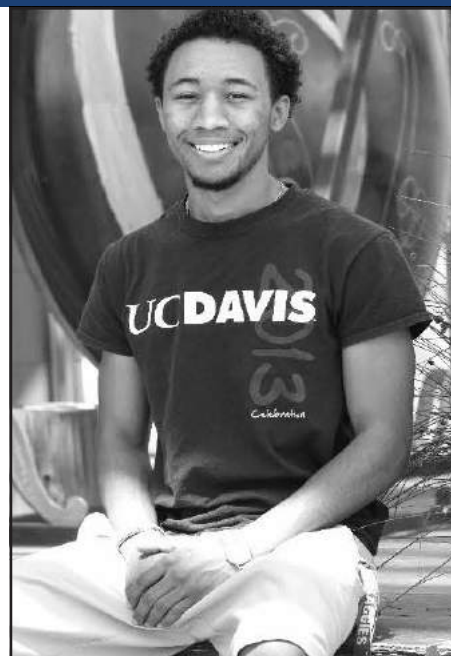
A few years ago, the only thing Culberson — who grew up in Stockton and Compton — saw for himself was gang activity and petty drug dealing.

*"I lived in the roughest parts and I made it out,"* he said.

Any time he runs into people who knew him around the eighth grade, he says they're surprised at how his life turned out — that he has a life to speak of at all. *"They say, 'We thought you were going to be dead or locked locked up, you were that crazy back then,'"* he shared.

Culberson credits his mother, Ambria Alston, for putting him on the right path, saying as a single parent, she "sacrificed everything" to secure a better future for him.

*"I went into panic mode,"* Ms. Alston said of seeing her son get involved with a neighborhood gang. *"I saw him making bad choices and I prayed to God on what to do with him."*



*After a rocky childhood, Culberson has turned his life around and is focused on a career in science and medicine. After his undergraduate studies, he wants to attend medical school in Davis, Loma Linda or Stanford.*

*"I knew if I didn't get him out of Stockton, I was going to lose him,"* said Ms. Alston, now a middle school teacher.

Culberson eventually went to live with his father in Compton for nine months. Seeing his father's "lifestyle," Ms. Alston said, was enough to finally convince her young son, he didn't want the same negativity for his life. She later enrolled him at Elk Grove's Laguna Creek High School and commuted back and forth from Stockton every day so he could attend his senior year there.

Culberson admits he wasn't the "nerdiest kid in school" and was largely unfocused until his junior year of high school. It was also in the 11th grade that his interest in medicine peaked, after being diagnosed with Gastroesophageal reflux disease — known by the acronym GERD — a digestive disorder he says "feels like a heart attack."

*"I've always had a keen interest in the body and how it works and how I could cure myself without meds,"* Culberson stated. His mother also shared that he was previously diagnosed with ADHD and was on medicine for it until he was 8 years old.



*Despite facing difficulties as a single parent, Ambria Alston says the sacrifices she's made for her son's future are well worth it. She often texts him with the simple message, "Keep God first and stay focused."*

While the GERD is now under control, dealing with the disease has had a lasting impact on Culberson.

*"I didn't see any Black physicians and I questioned that,"* he said.

The lack of people who look like him is also an issue he's come across at UC Davis.

*"We're the minority. You don't see yourself often and that in itself creates division,"* he said.

Culberson says he hasn't met any African American professors in the sciences and that there are only "two handfuls" of African Americans in his fields of study. Many often switch majors, he says, due to their difficulty. Culberson is a member of the Black Community of Science, which meets weekly on campus in an effort to build a strong community/ alliance among the Black students and faculty involved in the Biological Sciences. He calls the interaction extremely important.

*"It's a feeling of family,"* he said.

He and several others are using their science and engineering knowledge to create a mobile device application, the #Black-AggiesAPP, that will help connect African American students and faculty to each other and to much-needed resources.

Having grown up in Stockton and Compton, Culberson said he's already seen African Americans isolate themselves and doesn't want to see that at UC Davis.

*"I thought, 'How can I use what I learned in the 'hood and apply it to a university setting?' Gangs stick together, so I thought, 'How can I have the community at UC Davis stick together?'"* he shared.

When it comes to academics, Ms. Altson says her son is "self-driven."

She also shared that her son's first time in college was at age five when she had to take him to her classes at Fresno State University when she didn't have child care.

*"That may have had an impact on him,"* she said.

In addition to his full class load and hours spent studying, Culberson is a member of UC Davis' boxing team and makes time to speak to young people at area schools. He doesn't shy away from telling his life story or sugarcoat what it takes to succeed at UC Davis.



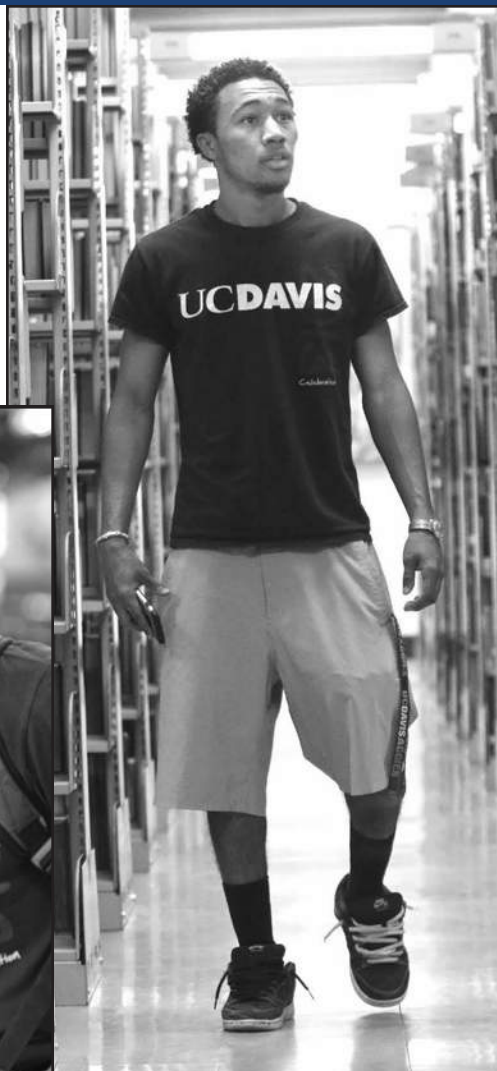
*Culberson is working with other UC Davis students and alums to create a mobile app that will connect Blacks at the university.*

*"First and foremost I have to be real with them,"* he said.

*"I let them know it is challenging, that it's really, really difficult and may seem unbearable. But I tell them, 'I'm doing it and my mentor did it before me.'"*

African American students, he said, seem receptive because of his open and honest approach.

*"I know their struggle and I know this struggle,"* he said of growing up in low-income areas and of being in college.



*He has a grueling course load, but 19-year-old, double science major Matthew Culberson says he feels privileged to attend UC Davis.*

Culberson's short-term goal is to work and "give back" at the Imani Clinic, run by UCD students in Oak Park. His long-term goal is working in an emergency room setting, conducting research and working as a science teacher.

This week, Culberson will be presented alongside other area young people with a scholarship from the Sacramento Area Black Caucus (SABC) during its "To Be Young Gifted & Black" annual recognition dinner. Culberson is a previous recipient and says the funds, and others he won from local fraternities, are helping him realize his dreams.

*"I would not be able to be here (at UCD) without those scholarships,"* he shared. ■