

by cassandra gainer

transformation

photo by mark dellas

As a child growing up in Brooklyn’s Red Hook neighborhood, Thomas Beauford would sometimes go to the rooftop of his building in the largest housing project in the borough and look out to where the Statue of Liberty shone in the distance.

Often cited as the best view of Lady Liberty in the city, Red Hook is connected to Wall Street and Lower Manhattan’s Financial District by the Battery Tunnel. The two neighborhoods are separated by less than two miles, a roughly 20-minute journey under the murky waters of the East River, but they might as well have been a world apart, a reality that was not lost on Beauford, even as a child.

“I always thought, from a young age, about all the possibility you could see from there,” Beauford recalls, his voice trailing slightly as if he is back on that rooftop. “I had this thing like a beacon right in front of me—I could see it so clearly.”

Born in Harlem, the second of four brothers, Beauford moved with his family to Red Hook as a young child. His parents had come to New York from South Carolina during the Great Migration, the largest population shift in United States history as Black citizens moved north seeking opportunity and freedom from the oppression of the Jim Crow south. Beauford’s father owned a trucking business, often enlisting his sons in the hard work of moving jobs on the weekends. A crowd of aunts, uncles, and cousins lived nearby.

“You know, we had our challenges,” he says of his childhood. “But I don’t know that we realized it at the time. My mother was one of seven children, my dad was one of 11. We had just a huge extended family, lots of support.”

Beauford attended New York City public schools, where he was identified early as an exceptional student.

“I did have a love of learning, and I was lucky enough to have really good teachers. These were people who would say to me, ‘Hey, you should read this book. You should see this play,’” Beauford recalls. “There were people taking their time to invest in you, helping to form you as a person. They were inspirational, and great examples of what to do.”

In the gritty, crime-riddled Red Hook that would become the epicenter of the crack epidemic in the 1990s, Beauford also saw daily the dark shadow the neighborhood cast over many of its residents: “I also had great examples of what not to do. I lived in that paradox.”

Still, perhaps counter to conventional stereotypes of places like Red Hook, Beauford found refuge in the community, even in its rougher edges.

“I think even they could see there was something about me and they were very protective of me,” Beauford says. “It’s the way that community works. If you show some talent at a young age, they make sure you steer clear of this or that because they recognize that you could do something good for the community one day.”



Beauford attended Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers, one of the first business-focused high schools in New York City and the school he'd set his sights on after a middle school classmate told him that CPAs earned as much as one thousand dollars a week.

"Now, I had no idea what a CPA was, but I could not fathom a thousand dollars a week," he says, laughing. "That was what movie stars made. I decided right then that I was going to that school."

He sailed through his coursework there, finishing the curriculum early enough to spend his senior year in a work-study internship at a local bank before enrolling in a local community college.

It was in his first year as a college student that Beauford stumbled for the first time. He had returned to his high school to watch a basketball game and, as the game ended, noticed his coat had been stolen. Outside, a confrontation over the stolen coat erupted into a fight that ended with Beauford in the local police station's basement, beaten by officers. Injured and bleeding from a cut over his eye, he was transported to the hospital for treatment.

"I had done all of these things, I'd rung all of these bells, checked all the boxes. This was not an experience I was supposed to have," Beauford says. "I remember thinking that the nurses would recognize that this should not happen to a kid like me, but they just kind of looked past me—to them, it was just something they saw every day."

This was a life-altering moment for Beauford that disrupted his perception of the world around him, particularly beyond the borders of Red Hook and the community that had protected him. In the years that followed, he struggled at times to maintain his momentum.

"There were times when my head was just in some other space," he explains. "I would start looking at some of the kids in my neighborhood, they seemed to be having fun, and I maybe felt I was denying myself that. And what does it matter if you're going to get the same outcomes, right? The same thing is going to happen to you."

Though Beauford would ultimately graduate from college, earn an executive MBA from the University at Buffalo, and build an impressive career as an international banking executive, as a young man he charted a jagged path toward success, one marked with many stops and starts along the way.

But he always found his way, something he credits to his father: "I figured if my dad could do the hard work each day in his truck, then I could certainly get up in the morning to work as an accounting tutor or whatever it was, where at the end of the day I didn't have to worry about what my hands looked like. My brothers and I sometimes joke and call it a curse, but our father really did pass a strong work ethic on to us."

While he finished out his college degree, Beauford spent several years in an entry-level position at the family-run Republic National Bank. And while the role was a good opportunity that offered him the time to hone important skills, he recognized quickly that he

would never be considered an insider there.

"I worked alongside colleagues who were getting opportunities to work in different countries, but you only got the chance to do that if you were somehow connected within the family structure," he admits.

A turning point would come for him when, in 1999, Republic National Bank was acquired by international banking behemoth HSBC.

Beauford was accepted into HSBC's international management program and was tapped for an overseas assignment developing call centers to lower-cost regions in Asia. In India and Malaysia, Beauford built and managed large call centers staffed by employees who were largely first-generation college graduates.

"These were people who were not only the first person in their family but the first person in their entire village to attend college," Beauford explains. "They were trying to make their lives better, yes, but also trying to better the lives of their families, their communities. In some cases, everyone in their village had kicked in to make sure they got an education."

Beauford saw himself in these people, who had traveled long distances, carrying with them the hopes of their communities: "Their stories were not unlike mine. And even though at the end of the day they were going to similar workplaces and doing the same jobs as their colleagues in the West, they weren't accepted as equals."

He also saw firsthand the impact of history and generational trauma as he fielded complaints from Western colleagues that employees in these new markets were not aggressive enough in their collection practices.

"What you had to understand was that many of these employees were from countries that had just gotten their independence from the UK in the 1960s," Beauford explains. "So they're one generation removed from this and they're now calling to demand money from these same people. It's a major shift that the culture was still processing."

Beauford quickly earned a reputation at HSBC as an adept troubleshooter in overseas markets. He credits his background, which differed from those of most of his colleagues, as a primary factor in his success.

"I could operate differently because I understood what things were important to these employees and why they did the things they did," Beauford says. "It absolutely gave me an edge. I became this person they would call—sometimes in the middle of the night—to say, 'Look there's a problem in this country we need taken care of. Can you be there in two days?'"

As he grew his career, Beauford found inspiration in the employees he managed and his experiences abroad to grow his commitments to his community, serving on diversity councils and non-profit boards.

"I had realized that I was a person who was always going to look out for people who may be facing some obstacles and needed an opportunity," he says of his expanding engagement in these roles.

“I wanted to step into that space. Much like those employees from those faraway villages, I felt that I owed it to my community to do this work.”

Beauford eventually returned stateside when asked by HSBC to tackle a short-term project in Buffalo, New York. What was supposed to be a temporary assignment became a permanent move when Beauford met his wife and decided to make Buffalo home.

“It was my intent to be here for two years but then, you know how it goes, boy meets girl,” he laughs. “That was 2006. Now it’s 2023 and I’m still here.”

In Buffalo, Beauford doubled down on his volunteer work, investing time in more than a dozen non-profit organizations, including the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County, the International Institute of Buffalo, and the Buffalo Urban League. He had passion for the work, but balancing the demands of his corporate career, volunteer commitments, and his growing family was at times a challenge.

Then one day, in October of 2019, Beauford received a call from a high school classmate he had stayed in touch with through the years. She shared that she had recently left her career in education to work at Goodwill, a move that surprised Beauford.

“She mentioned that her organization had a new CEO with a background very similar to mine. And she asked me, ‘Have you ever considered being a non-profit CEO?’”

He told her that he hadn’t, hung up, and didn’t give it another thought—until two weeks later, when someone sent him a job posting for the role of CEO of Goodwill of Western New York.

“It was kind of a coincidence. When my friend from high school called me, it was abstract and I didn’t really think about it again,” Beauford says. “But when I saw this job posting with all the requirements, I started to think, ‘This is something I could actually do.’”

Life was busy, and the time wasn’t right; Beauford did not pursue the Goodwill opportunity. Less than a month later, though, he attended the annual gala for the Buffalo Urban League, an organization he’d been involved with for many years. At the gala, then CEO Brenda McDuffie announced that she was retiring from the organization after more than 20 years at its helm.

Another month later, Beauford saw McDuffie again at a holiday party, where he struck up a conversation with her: “I said, ‘Brenda, I’ve been doing some thinking and this actually might be my dream job.’ And she looked at me and said, ‘Well, follow your dream.’”

In August of 2020, Beauford was appointed CEO of the Buffalo Urban League.

“Finally, I felt like I had a job where I could feed my family while also feeding my soul,” Beauford says.

But it wasn’t a transition that everyone understood: “People often asked me at the time, ‘Why now?’ There was just so much uncertainty. It was the pandemic. People were dying, there was no vaccine, no end in sight. It was George Floyd. It was the election, the census. No one knew the direction of the economy because the

pandemic was this big unknown. When you have this much uncertainty, it’s not the time to introduce additional change. Enough change is happening without you being complicit.”

But after decades of confronting uncertainty as a leader in banking—first at HSBC, then at Citi Bank, and finally at M&T Bank—Beauford leaned into it. He set his sights on addressing the organization’s infrastructure, relying on his years of management experience. It was a familiar task for Beauford, and well within the confines of his comfort zone.

“But then not even a year and a half later we had May 14th,” Beauford says.

It was a day that changed everything.

At 2:30 p.m. on May 14th, 2022, an 18-year-old white supremacist and self-described ethno-nationalist entered the Tops supermarket on Jefferson Avenue on the East Side of Buffalo armed with an AR-15-style rifle.

Six minutes later, 60 shots had been fired. Ten people, all of whom were Black, had been murdered. Three more people had been injured.

“The East Side of Buffalo is largely Black. It has 30 percent of the population of Buffalo, and about 40 percent of the land mass. It’s significant,” Beauford explains. “But it’s also the most underserved and under-resourced place in the city.”

In Beauford’s mind, years of disinvestment and discriminatory practices and policies, intentional or unintentional, by design or by default, had led to that day.

“The conditions that existed on the East Side of Buffalo on May 13th made that particular site a target for what happened the next day,” he says. “It was a Saturday, and based on the lack of available places to shop for food on the East Side, there’s a very high probability that this demographic is going to be at this one store. If you were a person who wanted to cause that type of harm to a certain kind of demographic, then the East Side was a good target.”

As only the fifth CEO since the Buffalo Urban League’s founding in 1927, Beauford understood the responsibility he had in that moment. His mission changed in an instant.

“May 14th didn’t call for management,” he explains. “People didn’t care about how much you knew—they wanted to know how much you cared. People needed to feel that you understood their journey and their greatest fears at a time like that. It was an opportunity for greater leadership and I had to make the shift.”

In the days and weeks that followed, all eyes were on the East Side. Reporters poured into the city, chasing the next byline. Organizations and individuals around the world reached out to the Buffalo Urban League with offers of support. Beauford even accepted an invitation to a summit at the Biden White House.

“There was an immediate response, all these people parachuting in and giving things, serving food,” Beauford says. “But as is always the case, sooner or later, the cameras go away, and they were gone as fast as they had come in.”

But while the national focus on Buffalo waned, Beauford’s

commitment to his city and its people did not. He returned to the work of shaping the Urban League’s long-term strategic plan. With some early success in securing funding partners, Beauford and his team steadily raised the revenue needed to make that plan a reality. The organization’s voice grew stronger under Beauford’s leadership and offers of partnership and support continued coming in.

“One day, I get an email from someone that says, ‘We’ve been looking at your work and we would like to support you. Do you have time for a call?’” Beauford recalls.

He accepted. He took the call from home, where he was shocked to learn that the voice on the other end of the phone was that of a representative for one of the wealthiest women in the United States, famed philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, who had made a public pledge in 2019 to donate at least half of her wealth to charity in her lifetime.

In October of 2022, Beauford announced Scott’s gift to the Buffalo Urban League—an unsolicited, unrestricted \$6 million, the largest single contribution in the organization’s nearly 100-year history.

“In the nonprofit world, nobody just gives you six million dollars in working capital,” Beauford says, a tinge of disbelief still audible in his voice. “It really was transformational for us. It put us in a place where we can strengthen our infrastructure while doing more work. We’re just operating from a whole different space.”

The unexpected infusion of capital enabled Beauford to envision a future for the organization beyond meeting the immediate needs of its constituents, one in which the Urban League could operate as a steward for the long-term transformation of Buffalo’s East Side, a transformation both driven by and enjoyed by the people who call it home.

“We have the opportunity in front of us to drive development without displacement,” he explains, “to enable people who have been in the community for generations to remain in their community, participate in its transformation, and maintain equity and ownership in the East Side in its new form, with all of its new infrastructure and resources.”

Beauford cautions that not all change happens quickly and underscores the need for the East Side’s transformation to be driven with the same intensity, deliberation, and intentionality that has shaped decades of disenfranchisement for its residents. While he expects positive changes in the near term, Beauford admits that others may take years to materialize. He knows that much of the vision will come to fruition long after he has stepped down as CEO of the Buffalo Urban League.

Though he looks years younger, Beauford is now in his early 60s. While previous CEOs led the Buffalo Urban League for decades of their lives, Beauford acknowledges that length of tenure is unlikely for him. Still, he scoffs when asked about his legacy.

“So maybe this is part of my legacy,” he offers. “We’ve outgrown our headquarters and we do have the idea of building a campus, of being more intentional about where we are located.”

In November of 2023, the Buffalo Urban League unveiled plans

for a new 40,000-square-foot building on the East Side of Buffalo. The 25 million-dollar project positions the organization in the heart of the community it serves, and will be a significant catalyst for the renewal that the organization aspires to drive there.

For Beauford, the new headquarters is an opportunity to establish something beautiful and lasting that can serve as an inspiration for the community—much like the view from his rooftop in Red Hook did for him as a child.

Today, Red Hook is a much different neighborhood than the one of Beauford’s youth, though the Statue of Liberty still glimmers on the horizon.

An IKEA—the furniture chain’s sole New York City outpost—cuts a blocky blue and yellow silhouette against the waterfront, once a historic dry dock buzzing with the activity of longshoremen. Luxury cruise ships and massive ocean liners loom over Red Hook, coughing smog for blocks. On weekends, IKEA customers from across the city stream off the ferry from Manhattan in search of particle-board furniture. They mingle with cruise ship passengers, ducking into trendy restaurants, retail shops, and art galleries. A Google search reveals dozens of articles touting Red Hook as New York City’s latest undiscovered hot spot.

When asked what he makes of the changes in his old neighborhood, Beauford pauses. He doesn’t answer the question, but is instead transported back to a moment of his childhood.

“We had some neighbors, right next door,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “Our apartments were so close to each other that if we needed to borrow something, I could open the door to my apartment and just hand it over to them. Two girls and a brother, they were a little bit older, but they were almost like siblings to me. One of their daughters went to Dartmouth. I think she actually worked for the governor. And my son just graduated from Brown.”

Beauford pauses again, shakes his head as if in disbelief.

“If I think about where we came from—it’s just a whole different trajectory.”

To Beauford, who has watched Red Hook change from afar, his old neighborhood is a testament to human resilience and the ability of communities—and people, like himself, his neighbors—to reinvent themselves again and again, even in the face of adversity. It is also a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of gentrification, what happens when the choices made for a neighborhood leave the members of a community behind.

It’s a narrative Beauford is hellbent on changing in Buffalo.

The latest chapter of Red Hook ends with an IKEA, a fleet of cruise ships, and row after row of fashionable cafés and boutiques. But on the East Side of Buffalo, the story is still largely unwritten.

“You know, I was born in Harlem and watched Harlem change over time. And I was not in a position as a kid to impact what happened in Brooklyn over the years. But I am here now, in Buffalo,” Beauford says, sitting up a bit straighter, a slight charge in his voice. “I think the third time’s the charm.”

