Joseph Alston was the first graduate of City College’s Master’s Program in Public Administration back in 2010. (It hadn’t yet become part of the Colin Powell School.) He grew up in the Harlem projects, with just his mom and siblings. “I got in lots of trouble,” he says, “including run-ins with law enforcement.”

He is now a chief of operations for Hunt Guillot and Associates, working on storm recovery efforts for the New York Governor’s Office. He is the proud father of a nineteen-month-old child, travels, and invests in real-estate as a hobby.

“If I can make it,” says Mr. Alston, “anyone can.” “At the end of the day, you can’t let your past dictate what your future will be,” he continued, “I don’t buy that line.”

He credits the master’s program with helping him on his way. “You learn many important skills, even if you don’t think you do,” he said. “I had to take a writing test for a job with the New York State Assembly, and all I could think about was the communications class and putting the bottom line first,” he explained. “I was offered the job on the spot, but I took one in New York City instead.”

The most important thing about the program, he says, is the opportunity to meet professionals in public service. He urges current students to do an internship and to go to the workshops, networking receptions, job fairs, and other events the program sponsors. “I didn’t seek a single one of the jobs I have held in my career, including my first after graduation,” he explained. “I was asked to apply, and it was all due to contacts and networking.”

His fondest memory of the program is how tight-knit his cohort became. “We helped each other get through it,” he recalled. “You think you know what master’s level work is until you get into the middle of it.”

His secret to career success? “Build on what you learn in school and never stop learning,” said Alston. “I refuse to stay put, and I never pass up an opportunity to learn something new. The skills I have acquired along the way have increased my marketability.”

Asked how he would like folks to remember him at his retirement party someday, Joseph responded, “I hope they talk about the communities I helped revitalize and the people I helped move ahead, especially people of color.”