

The taste of success

BY MATT FREEMAN

Television chef, published author, and literacy advocate Curtis Aikens found success scary until he finally got the help he needed to overcome his own illiteracy

Curtis Aikens was intelligent, articulate, energetic, and likable, the kind of guy people wanted to see succeed—and until one night when he was 26, that was a big part of his problem.

His nimble mind and winning personality had taken him through elementary and high school and on to college, and had enabled him to create a successful produce business in his early 20s—despite the fact that he could not read.

There are remarkable people like Aikens who can make such deceptions work, but the effort is tremendous, and the strain was showing in Aikens' life. His self-esteem was low, success had scared him, and he was letting his once-successful business slide toward failure.

And then one night, watching television, he saw a commercial for a local library's literacy program. "This commercial spoke to me," Aikens says. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed, the commercial said, call us, we can teach you to read. And Aikens, who had just about reached the end of his rope as a nonreader, got a chance to start his life over.

Starting out wrong

Today, Curtis Aikens is a television chef and published author with four books to his credit, and he maintains a crowded schedule of personal appearances. But he still remembers keenly his early years in Conyers, Georgia, in the early days of desegregation.

In those days, the mid-1960s, Aikens, an African American, had attended a seg-

regated school through the second grade. "Even in the second grade, I knew something was wrong," he says. He was aware the school was substandard, and he envied a neighbor who was attending a white school because she could read.

So Aikens was enrolled in a new, integrated school. But now he was hopelessly behind his classmates. Finally, the day came when his mother met with his third-grade teacher and was told that Aikens needed to repeat the third grade. He says now that although he knows no one meant to make him feel bad, at the time he felt that this meant he was stupid, incapable of learning. "It's kind of emotional, even at age 40, thinking back to those days," Aikens says.

His response was to hide the fact that he could not read, and he succeeded all too well. His intelligence and charm made the deception possible. If he had a test, he would scrawl illegibly on the paper, and when the teacher asked him to interpret his writing he would give the answers, relying on his excellent memory.

It seems unlikely that a person could get away with this forever, but Aikens was a good kid, a nice guy, and everyone wanted to give him a break. He was articulate, good in sports, well liked. "That was my saving grace," he says. He let his teachers think that he was a basically good person who was a little lazy about his schoolwork but still likely to succeed in life, and he kept moving through the system.



"Don't worry about it"

College was the same story. Aikens would take a tape recorder to lectures. He would get friends to write papers for him. He admits frankly now that he cheated any way he could.

"I'm not proud of the way I cheated, but back then I did what I had to do to get by," Aikens says. He did try to address his problem. At the first school he attended, he sought help, admitting that he had problems reading. "Oh, you're a football player," he was told. "Don't worry about it."

That "broke my heart," Aikens says. He transferred to another school. But during a holiday break, he took a trip to California, fell in love with it, and dropped out of school to move there. Eventually he created what was to become a quite successful produce business, a field in which he had a lifelong interest.

Aikens succeeded in business, but his self-esteem problems and fear of success led him to undercut what he had created, and the business began to shrink. But then, one night, he saw the commercial for the Marin County Free Library Literacy Program. It was the invitation to start over that he had always needed.

Starting over

"It saved my life," Aikens says. To begin with, it was a relief just to admit out loud that he couldn't read. Once in the program, he worked on all the steps in the process of learning to read that he had missed 20 years before. With the tutors' help, he read letters he had saved from long ago. "Oh," he would say, "so that's what that was about."

"We worked *hard*," Aikens says. But after a year and a half or so, he had become a reader. "All of the sudden one night," he says, "the lights came on and I was reading."

Aikens says that he still works on reading every day. Spelling is a particular challenge. But he has written four books, two of which, *Curtis Aikens' Guide to the Harvest* (Peachtree, 1993) and *Curtis Cooks with Heart and Soul* (Hearst, 1995), are currently available. Publishing a book is exciting for most authors, but for Aikens, it was a special triumph, and when his first book was printed, he says, "I cried. I actually cried."

It seems that fear of success is no longer such a problem for Aikens. From

California, he moved to New York, supplying produce to clients such as the United Nations and the Plaza Hotel. He became a consultant for corporations such as Pizza Hut, Pillsbury, and McDonald's.

He also supplied food for major television and film projects, and eventually became a radio and television personality himself. He is the host of *Pick of the Day*, a show on the TV Food Network that showcases his expertise as a meat-free chef. He also appears on *Good Morning America* and a multitude of other shows.

Avid advocacy

In addition to his personal appearances as a chef, Aikens regularly speaks to audiences promoting literacy and donates a portion of his book royalties to literacy programs. His Web site, www.curtisaiikens.com, has an entire section devoted to his literacy advocacy.

As a result of these efforts he has met former U.S. President George Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush, as well as First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. ABC's *World News Tonight* featured his participation in the First Annual Literacy Festival in Cairo, Georgia, USA.

Aikens says that in his appearances he tries to make people aware that it's not just the angry kid who may have a problem; the well-behaved, unremarkable child may also be struggling with literacy.

If the classroom were a loving, safe environment, and if someone came forward and admitted that they once had a problem but overcame it with help, more children and adults might get help for reading problems, Aikens believes.

That, he says, is what he tries to be—the kind of example and inspiration for people that he himself lacked for so long. Aikens isn't pretending any more, and he's trying to spare others his pain and wasted effort. Some of his memories may still hurt, but today it seems that all those people who assumed that Curtis Aikens would eventually succeed in life were righter than they knew.

Matt Freeman is senior editor of *Reading Today*.