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Yes, We *Still* Can

How the Black Community
Will Save Itself



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NELSON

EDITED BY
DANIELLE POINTDUJOUR
@Dani_whispers

Elevate

WELLNESS | S

Sakina Pitts, principal
of Newark, N.J.'s
Chancellor Avenue
middle school

Helping Kids Cope

SCHOOLS, NONPROFIT
GROUP PARTNER TO
FIGHT EFFECTS OF
COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

By TOMIKA ANDERSON

If you asked 17-year-old Newark, N.J. resident Naseer Wilkerson to describe what his neighborhood looks like at night, he couldn't do it. That's because he hasn't seen it for years. He maps the most direct route, Monday through Friday, between the apartment he shares with his mom to his high school a few blocks away and then over to his friend Daniel's house to do homework or play video games. Naseer—a Boy Scout

and an aspiring video game creator—says he avoids being outside as much as possible to keep from being killed.

"A shooting can happen day or night around my way, so being out on the streets is a no-go," the 10th-grader says from the office of his friend and mentor, Sakina Pitts, principal of Chancellor Avenue middle school. Pitts helped Naseer get accepted to American History High, a magnet school where he currently has an A in calculus. "People get shot and stabbed left and right there, even

babies," he says. "Last summer, my friends and I all went to Hersheypark in Pennsylvania and stayed for two days. It was better than being home."

Pitts knows the difficulties Naseer faces all too well. A student at Chancellor herself in the 1990s, she returned as a substitute teacher and eventually became a permanent fourth-grade teacher. She went on to become a literacy teacher, a vice principal and, finally, the principal.

Pitts and her teachers, who often spend

more time ensuring students are safe, fed and in clean uniforms than they do inside classrooms, are supported in their work to both educate and rehabilitate by the nonprofit Turnaround for Children, an organization that works closely with 10 high-poverty public schools in New York, Newark and Washington, D.C., to promote healthy student development and academic success.

Founded in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to address the trauma on New York City public school students, organizers realized it wasn't the kids near ground zero who needed the most help but their peers in rough neighborhoods in Harlem and the Bronx.

For the past 14 years, Turnaround has worked with teachers and administrators at more than 90 elementary and middle schools with high concentrations of students impacted by adversity to translate neuroscientific research into tools and strategies of success. "There are 47,000 schools in low-income communities across the United States, the majority of which are underperforming," reports Turnaround founder Pamela Cantor, M.D. "It's in these high-needs schools in predominantly low-income communities where adversity is concentrated."

Cantor's program, in addition to ensuring schools employ positive discipline plans rather than primarily suspending or expelling students, brings in social work consultants who help build student support systems.

They also bring together school support staff to devise a multidisciplinary team to assess the kids and connect them with services linked to community-based organizations and mental health partners.

Most of what the mental health providers look to do is get to the heart of students' "toxic stress." In 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a report that examined the role of early life toxic stress in shaping one's health across a lifetime. Researchers define toxic stress as frequent or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support. Risk factors include neglect and abuse, extreme poverty, family violence, substance abuse and parental mental health problems. Studies show young children who experience toxic stress are at high risk for a multitude of health issues in adulthood, including cardiovascular and obstructive lung



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disease, cancers, asthma, autoimmune disease and depression.

However, pediatrician Nadine Burke Harris, M.D., MPH, FAAP—whose talk on how trauma affects health across a lifetime is one of the most popular TED Talks, with nearly 2.5 million viewers—says that although the prognosis may appear dire, there is hope.

"There's an abundance of research showing us that as humans, we actually have the ability to buffer each other's stress responses," says Burke Harris, founder of the San Francisco-based Center for Youth Wellness. "It turns out that witnessing violence on the street if your parent or caregiver is healthy, intact and able to make meaning for you out of what's going on is much less damaging to kids than witnessing violence in the home where you don't have a caregiver who can be a buffer. In cases where the caregiver is

healthy, we see that the child's brain and body are able to recover and we don't see the long-term harm," she adds.

This is why Burke Harris stresses the importance of caregivers putting the proverbial oxygen masks on themselves first.

"There are six things that the science shows us makes the most difference in helping to heal a deregulated stress response," she says, breaking down the steps to self-care. "Sleep, nutrition, exercise, mindfulness-like meditation, mental health and healthy relationships are all critical," Burke Harris says. "Those six things help to regulate our stress hormones and enhance neuroplasticity, which is the ability of the brain and the nervous system to recover from harm."

And harm for Black and Brown children, coupled with the criteria researchers call adverse childhood experiences—physical, emotional or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect; growing up in a household with a mentally ill, substance-dependent or incarcerated parent; parental separation or divorce or domestic violence—can also take the form of discrimination, community violence and foster care, all of which can impact children's developing brains and bodies, Burke Harris says.

All the more reason why mental health resources, Pitts believes, should be mandatory, for both the children and parents in schools.

"My dream school is one that focuses on the social and emotional wellness of the child first and foremost," she says. "I'm talking about an entire wing in the school dedicated to mental health—like you can go see a mental health specialist in room 301. Embedded within the school schedule is also time for the students who need intense therapy to receive it," she adds. "That's what they need to succeed."

Naseer is proof. Since his time at Chancellor, Pitts reports he's become less angry and combative.

With Turnaround's help, he's received support to work through the pain of losing his father to violence when he was only a year old.

His attention has now shifted to academics, and he plans to go college. So while Naseer still struggles to get by in his current environment, one thing is for sure: He sees a way out.