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Uplift for Endangered Youths

Carver Terrace Program Works, But It Needs the City's Help

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Statistics show that about 65 percent of African American men in their twenties who failed to complete high school are unemployed. By the time these men are in their thirties, 60 percent have served prison time. In Carver Terrace, a Northeast Washington neighborhood, we live those statistics.

Carver Terrace was once nicknamed Little Vietnam because of the intensity of the violence there. The community is rife with drugs, joblessness and the void created by men cycling in and out of the criminal justice system. In 2004 Washington recorded almost 200 murders. Most occurred in poor neighborhoods such as Carver Terrace, and most of the victims were young black men.

I work for an initiative funded by a nonprofit foundation that is trying to change this bleak picture. The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which promotes solutions to urban problems, has established several programs to help the people of Carver Terrace, particularly the neighborhood's young.

In the foundation's Youth Safe Haven program, police act as mentors to children and try to become integral members of the neighborhood. The foundation's Quantum Opportunities program addresses the needs of high school students through a four-year regimen of mentoring, computer-based learning and community service. The teenagers are given a stipend to help pay for college.

When I was recruiting for the Youth Safe Haven program, I asked a 10-year-old resident of Carver Terrace -- call him Jackson -- what he wanted to be when he got older. His answer was that he didn't think he would get older. Most of the men in his family were dead -- killed -- by age 22. Others were in prison serving mandatory sentences, many for being caught with small amounts of drugs.

When I visited Jackson's apartment, his mother slapped her son in front of me after he had politely offered me a glass of water. The windows in their chaotic apartment were riddled with bullet holes. Jackson's mother later lost custody of her son because she was abusive and strung out on drugs. But thanks to the foundation's program, Jackson's story may yet have a happy ending.

Jackson's mother, once she realized I was not trying to take her son away, enrolled in parenting classes the foundation offers. She is in detox now, and she has her son back. Jackson went from failing school in September to being on the honor roll in February.

Jackson's story is not unique. It is reflected in the outcomes of Eisenhower Foundation programs around the country. Most students in these programs finish high school. Many go on to college; teenage pregnancies and encounters with the criminal justice system are reduced.

The foundation's two youth initiatives at Carver Terrace are part of a continuum of programs the foundation supports, including programs for ex-offenders, work-training initiatives for welfare recipients, community banking and community policing.

I grew up in public housing. I saw how drugs ravaged my friends. I felt the pain of growing up with no man as a consistent part of my life. With the help of my family, mostly women, I finally realized that I was the only author of the dictionary that defines me. I became a mentor because I was excited about becoming a symbol of possibility amid the despair and hopelessness that characterize so many young urban lives.

But family and even a foundation committed to improving urban lives cannot do enough to turn around a neighborhood such as Carver Terrace. The District must do its part, too. The D.C. Council and the mayor find ways to pay for marathons and baseball stadiums. They need to find the money for programs to help people who live in housing projects around the city, too. A funding commitment from the District and a partnership with foundations and the federal government to support initiatives such as those at Carver Terrace could give a lifeline to disadvantaged youths.

There are innovative ways to find the money, but what should not be in question is the goal of ensuring that the District's disadvantaged young people are not forgotten. We have proven solutions to the persistent problems generated by poverty. We just have to roll up our sleeves and get to work on them.

-- Reginald Grant