

True Tales From An Inner-City Teacher And Neighbor

I am a literacy specialist. I am a woman of faith. As an educator on the frontlines, I am the voice of the voiceless, for those who don't have a vehicle for storytelling like I have through this interview. As educators, we have influence with students. I was on the frontlines working as a continuation high school teacher in the hardest-hit communities, giving 31 years to the Los Angeles Unified School District, the first 15 spent in alternative education. Nobody was standing in line [then] to teach our incorrigibles, our diamonds in the rough. [But] We love teaching and we bend over backwards to give them strength, [to] motivate and inspire.

If you see it, if you witness it, if you know about it, if you hear about it, if you experience it, in your neighborhoods, in your schools, or next door, in the community, in the streets or on TV, you have been a victim of violent crime (VCC). It's just too hard to recover from those hard things. Violence crime became a negative wave of energy throughout our lives, in the community, for people of color yesterday, today, but hopefully and prayerfully, not tomorrow.

'Violent crime ran rampant on our block.'

Living in a closely-knit neighborhood, we've formed a community. All of our kids have grown up [together]. I have a neighbor whose son was shot in his left foot. I told him that he was going to dance again one day to make him feel better. I have a neighbor who was ambushed not three or four years ago; she was shot in her left thigh and right thigh. Her special needs kid was shot. She was getting ready to take her special needs son out to eat dinner. So much violence surrounded us just on the street where I lived.

Between 1990 to 2020, the data showed that, within a 25-mile radius where we lived, people had experienced high levels of theft, burglary, robbery and violence. Multiple breaking and entering into their homes, between Culver City, Inglewood, and [the] South Central area—[violence] running rampant. My family had just given me my first flat-screen television; my electronics were stolen the day after President Barack Obama's election and Michelle Obama's birthday. Nonetheless, it was unbelievable—everyone in the neighborhood was ecstatic about the election.

'I was working to keep hope alive.'

I'm not a product of the public school system. I attended a small Catholic high school and I went to college where they taught us problem solving. As a continuation high school teacher on the frontlines, if you have any compassion, [you're] working for the cause and the struggle—to keep hope alive in the community. Can't anyone tell me different. The students who were failing were called *curriculum casualties*. To me that is violent in itself. That is unconscionable, and yet they didn't want to pay [for] specialists to work one-on-one or pull out any of those kids.

While in college and grad school, I read books that gave me a foundation for insight into these societal issues, to be able to look at them from a different lens. As a literacy specialist, we had so many programs coming through the school to address their performance. We developed cadres for those performing below-basic and far-below-basic, combined with reluctant learners. Behavior problems arise astronomically. In those days, school psychologist and social workers were needed to support issues beyond the confines of the curriculum; they barely had a school nurse or counselors in elementary schools. [You need to] spend the money to work with professionals who can design a curriculum catered to a school community's social, psychological and learning needs.

Where didn't these violent crimes not knock on our doors?

Where didn't these violent crimes not knock on our doors? An office manager's son—a student at D. High School on the brink of graduation—was murdered on March 25th, 1998. Steven Hawkins was never acknowledged in his graduation ceremony which devastates his mother to this day. The girls that came to visit him in the casket picked up his body and kissed it. There were so many of them doing that that they had to put a veil over his face. It was the most tragic thing. They all live with that today.

That mother joined the [founder of] Justice for Murdered Children and they sojourned to the Million Mama March in Washington, DC in 2000. Her, along with V. and other mammas who had sons senselessly killed. V. had an organization called the *Cry No More* project. She and D. traveled to Sacramento to see the Wall of Children's Names Victims of Violent Crimes. They didn't have enough money to put their son's names on it, but they saw the names of other sons and that was enough for them.

What about other forgotten victims?

What about the lives of other victims or families, friends, neighbors, schools that were not noticed and got swept under the rug of the system? Or just forgotten or considered insignificant, or unimportant? Or worse

yet, connected to the very element of the crime that was perpetrated against them? Take V., for instance, a brilliant Latina student of mine in the mid-80's. V. sat in the front seat of a car outside of a party with her boyfriend when a bullet hit her in the head. Miraculously, V. showed up for summer school that year. She was a survivor of a violent crime in the community.

Man-child in prison.

From time to time, a teenage boy who attended our continuation school crosses my mind, C. He was part of our School on Wheels program. A bright boy [who] struck me at first sight as being different, wearing a yellow boa constrictor cascading around his neck. As the story goes, some 40-year-old crackhead woman claimed that C. was the murderer of a middle-aged woman who broke out of her witness protection program for drugs. At 16 or 17, he ended up doing life in prison. I saw a newspaper article about him, with a tear falling from his eye as they read the sentence. How this man-child, so smart, gentle and kind, ended up with such a fate before he was an adult, was beyond me.

'To me, you are young, gifted, Black and Brown.'

When I think about where I went for self-care during these times, it was definitely prayer, revival, praise and worship. I was a member a Church and the pastor there happened to be a psychiatrist. Rev. Dr. G. had resources where people could go for counseling or psychiatric services. He used to run a bulletin announcement about anyone who was a victim of violent crime. From those connections we were able to [refer many that had been traumatized.

There were [also] agencies that came to our continuation school to collaborate with a school youth opportunity program for 18- to 24-year-olds who hadn't completed a high school education. I worked with Latino kids as well as African-American kids. I remember some of the Latino boys, would say, "Ms. Holmes, we're not gifted. We're the f**k ups. You treat us like we're good kids." I said, "To me, you are young, gifted, Black and Brown. I don't know any other history about you. I look at you and I see possibilities, I see promise. This is an opportunity high school. As a child, you have the right to an education according to the tenets in The Children's Defense Fund."

'We wanted to teach students how to play together.'

We used a 75-point contract system for students, designing a specially-constructed curriculum with the A-G requirements to enable students to graduate. I was in charge of the English component; there was a teacher in charge of math and science, and another, history and social studies units. Students were required to earn enough credits to graduate. Many of them were school-age mothers, school-age fathers, or they worked. An accommodating attendance schedule allowed students to attend school from 8:00 am to noon.

One of the things we wanted to do was teach the students how to take turns, play together, play according to the rules, and play fairly. I wanted them to learn how to win or lose graciously, and how to cooperate and collaborate. Games are a great way to bring out personalities and characters, traits—positive traits—without, feuding, fussing and fighting. It was a good release, plus you have fun. The students took pride in striving to earn the privilege to participate in the board games and puzzle tables. The employees with the Opportunity Limited program would also come and talk to the kids.

'Anger is a public health problem.'

I ran across a book by Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith's entitled *Deadly Consequences*. Besides my Bible, this resource was my salvation. The book discusses how, during her time at an internship in an urban inner-city hospital, she noticed that victims of violent crimes—VVC—who came into the ER were perceived differently than other patients who came in with wounds, damages or injuries. If they were perceived by doctors to be in gangs, VVC wouldn't get good treatment in those early days. They'd be ignored or not given care because, *ob, he is a gang member*. She declared—and it's sort of a contention that everyone's now operating from—that this violent anger in our world, communities and lives is a public health problem.

There are layers and layers of these epidemic conditions. It's a social ill, due to poverty, cultural suppression, oppression and deprivation. The pervasive public health problem, due to lack of education [and] with its 'deadly consequences' is systemic. A poster with data diagramed the school-to-prison pipeline in the foster care system. What a frightening reality we face in the public school, being that seventy-five percent of the students are in the [foster] system.

What I read from Dr. Prothrow-Stith's book is that the victims of violent crimes are so uninformed. The predilection veers suicidal because the VVC inevitably returns to the same spot of the violent crime incident, the same situation, environment, circumstances. The VVC goes back to the scene of the crime you might say, and the VVC cycle happens again.

This was the predicament of one student who frequented the same public liquor store at late hours. He was so lethargic in [my] class; he kept his head down, he wasn't working. I'm inquiring, "What's wrong? Are you okay?" His wound is bandaged; he can hardly speak or be alert. He's not up to learning or studying—he's hurting. He just needs rest to recover, because he's been shot. I knew that he was in the healing process, but it was made mandatory that he be in school. That's why I said, "I hope you heal from things." That was the situation.

'Words that make a difference.'

While working as a school librarian at a high school in Westchester, a book entitled *This Is Not Cool Parts 1 & 2* came across my desk. It was written by a group of Georgia attorneys who compiled stories of youth that were prosecuted to the letter of the law for minor crimes—maybe beyond the law—because the youth and their parents didn't know the law. By not having the money to represent themselves [and] get a fair trial, these young adults served time. Both volumes are true stories of unbelievable crimes of innocence. I must have sold about a case of those books.

Another resource [came] when I was listening to a Long Beach minister, Reverend C., speaking on a local Sunday radio show on KIJH about BW. B.'s story is nothing short or less than a miracle. He's a Latino boy who was imprisoned and became a minister inside of the prison industrial complex. He later wrote a faith-based book entitled, *Young Man Arise!* As the allegations go, B. was an accomplice to a crime; he happened to be driving along for the ride. After five attempts, B. was pardoned by the [California] governor.

One of the people that helped him was C. M., the pastor of one of the First Churches in Los Angeles. Rev. W. is now a pastor at a church in the Long Beach/Paramount area. The radio host, Pastor C. told me that if I attended Minister W.'s church for a service, and shook his hand, they'd give me his books. I needed 25 books for my neighbor's boys and continuation students. All 25 were given out.

'Recovering from generational trauma.'

Author and trauma specialist Resmaa Manekem (*My Grandmother's Hands*) pointed out that, "Trauma in a person decontextualized over time looks like personality. Trauma in a family decontextualized over time looks like family traits. Trauma in people decontextualized over time looks like culture." Our whole culture in our society gets labeled as *angry*. According to Manekem, "If we appear angry, we have reason to be angry,

enduring so much trauma to our black bodies.” Trauma affects the human body, relationships in black families and Black societies. How do we recover from the trauma, to cover the trauma? My great aunt, a master quilter, used to tuck us tight in bed under a handmade quilt, to shelter us from all harm and danger.

‘Use arts and spoken word to lift up voices.’

When I was at L. High School, we did something just before the shooting death of Delish on March 17, 2005. The Watts Prophets had been doing writer’s workshops in the projects [so] we decided to take the workshops to the next level. The Watts Prophets from Watts and The Last Poets from New York put together a spoken word event, dance, performing arts and drum show at a community college venue. My only regret is that we didn’t videotape it; we would have had a great CD for antiquity. It was a wonderful show where we took a bus load of kids to the desert. It was raining cats and dogs, but we had that concert, inspiring and uplifting about 40 students. All we can say or do to inspire students, to creatively vent, to write, to express, to get it out there, to release, to recover, restore, renew, reinvent, reset... .

In the public parks and arts departments we should connect schools and neighborhoods to use more art, theater and performing arts with youth. A friend of mine, Ras. Jimmy H., who fronts a reggae group, I think Burning Spear, put together a great CD called *Five Wheel Drive, Mobile Edition*. I had him come to the continuation school for a spoken word unit. On one song called the *Mighty M’s*, Ras talks about great people whose names begin with the letter M who’ve done great things, from Montezuma to Mahatma Gandhi, to Martin Luther King and Mahalia. Performing these songs allowed us to use poetry and spoken word as a teaching tool.

I don’t know all that it’s going to take, but it’s going to take action from all of us. Just being aware of violence in our community as a public health problem is a start. Being aware of violent crimes not just in isolation, but that its ramifications have a rippling affect, trickling, and far reaching everywhere in our lives. Those cries must be heard, those reactions and feelings must be heard, those voices from negative incidents must be validated. We must strategize with proactive plans and programs of all kinds to redirect those negative forces.

We need to be intentional. A one size doesn’t fit all as far as schooling and education goes. To be conscious, socially conscious, environmentally conscious... these are the things that create change. We have to build those situations where this can happen. I think we need to give our youth an opportunity to form and shape lives that make them good, to shape their moral compass, and direct their world citizenry and their culture role and affinities. I think that there have been some positive outcomes, because some of our

kids became community activists and community organizers. We showed them how to canvas the neighborhood to get votes for propositions like affirmative action. The younger ones today are very community-conscious. They're trailblazers, making the changes. I do believe that some follow the path of faith. Any number of times, I've run into former students in church, in a hospital, in a place of business, in a utility company, or an auto dealership working.

'Take the time to care.'

What knocked on my door can knock on your door too. What happened on my block, can happen in your block too. What happened in your school, could happen in my school too. I think [that] in too many situations with ordinary citizens, devoted professionals, dedicated co-workers, and colleagues, we're not taking the time to care and be concerned. I just pray that we get better at being human beings really. I hope that we get better at this gift called life.

In conclusion, I'd like to share a story from the pandemic, about what happened after the lockdown. I recently had the opportunity to work as a long-term substitute teacher in a charter school. The beauty of this assignment was to work online on Zoom, in a hybrid situation learning new digital skills, in an area where a popular community entrepreneur, [the rapper] Nipsey Hussle, had been slain. Just like George Floyd Square [in Ferguson, Mo.], Marathon Square (the Marathon Clothing parking lot where Hussle was killed) has had a tremendous impact upon the Black community, school community, the business community and generally the flow of traffic, becoming a tourist attraction to pay homage and honor to the lives of these fallen Black soldiers.

The students read an article through a reading program, Achieve 3000, perfectly suited for the community and their reading level about the "Verdict of an Ex-Officer." We evaluated the pros and cons of the case as a reading and fact-finding assignment, [and] in preparation for an argumentative and persuasive writing unit. Lo and behold a generous donation arrived at the graduation breakfast from the Nipsey Hussle estate. Every student in the graduating class of 2021 was given a black Marathon hoodie. Watching the students gratefully receive their garments made a difference. Helping to distribute this sportswear was a magnanimous, edifying moment. A horrific trauma became a hallelujah moment.

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