

EAST of the RIVER

A COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER FOR WARD 7 & 8

OUR TEENS

by JOYCE A. FOURTH CLEMONS

District teens are crying out for help, and the adults in this city not only need to listen, but to respond in positive ways. Their cries should have been heard long before the mercury incident at Ballou High School; the killing of Devin Fowlkes at Anacostia High School; the killing of Princess Hansen in Sursum Corda; the killing of James Richardson at Ballou High School (and others); the gang violence in Mt. Pleasant; the escapees from group homes who have been killed or killed someone else; the teen car jackers; and other incidences that don't make the newspapers or the evening news.

It is well known that teen pregnancy, not only in the District, but across the nation, is often both a symptom and a source of many of today's most distressing and debilitating individual and social problems. The impact of teen pregnancy does not limit itself to the new family unit; it extends to the entire community. We all bear the social and fiscal costs of families begun by teens. The economic and social health consequences for teen parents, their children and our city are dramatic. Children of teen mothers are more likely to:

- perform significantly worse on tests of their cognitive development;
- experience poor health and school failure; and
- be victims of abuse and neglect, ending up in foster care.
- The sons of teen mothers are three times more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system.
- Daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen parents themselves.
- Teen parents are often trapped in a cycle of poverty because they are less able to complete their education and attain economic self-sufficiency.

According to "The \$747 Million Question," a publication produced by DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, for every dollar the District spends on the consequences of teen pregnancy, it spends less than one cent on prevention. Nearly half of the combined budgets of the Departments of Health and Human Services are directed to assistance programs for families begun by teens.

Research shows that teen pregnancy is less likely when boys and girls, regardless of race and income: connect to their families, schools and neighborhoods in positive and meaningful ways; get comprehensive, teen-friendly health care; make a clear plan that does not include pregnancy during their teen years; experience success in school from an early age; and have a sense of belonging.

For too long, discussions about teen pregnancy prevention have been bogged down in battles over abstinence versus contraception. While those are in fact the only two ways to prevent pregnancy, it is vital for adults to understand that prevention rests on motivation. Motivation is what determines whether a teen will make a conscious decision to avoid pregnancy in the first place. Adults in this city have to create opportunities, resources and supports that provide motivation for all teens in this city to avoid teen pregnancy. Adults have to step up to the plate and become that caring, consistent, trustworthy influence in the lives of District teens. Adults must offer the same things to all District teens that they provide for their own teens: health care, good schools, after school activities, safety, opportunities to develop their talents and interests, and love.

It is time to circle the wagons. The entire city needs to mobilize to give teens what they deserve, a chance. A chance to be safe; a chance to be educated through the public school system; a chance to have decent housing; a chance to have health care; and a chance to grow into healthy, productive residents of this city.

DC Campaign is challenging all segments of the community: the government, schools, faith institutions, community based organizations, and others to become involved in the lives of District teens. Don't let the cries of our teens go unheard because we have turned a deaf ear.

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