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Editorial

Stepping up to save our black males

By DeWarren Langley
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Black males, 17 and 21, charged with killing UNC student body president. Black male, 24, charged with fleeing an arrest and for possession of a firearm by a felon. Black male, 22, stabbed to death during an altercation at Northgate Mall. Black male, 24, sentenced to serve 11 to 14 years in prison for killing a male in 2005 and being an accessory to the fatal drive-by shooting of a student.

The general criminal age demographic in Durham is unfortunately between the ages of 16-25.

Sadly this narrative seems all too common in Durham.

According to the National Urban League's 2007 State of Black America, Portrait of the Black Male, African-American men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white males; seven times more likely to be incarcerated; and nine times more likely to die of homicide than their white counterparts.

The statistics while alarming and unfortunate are the norm.

In early March, the Durham Public Schools Board held a Kitchen Table conversation at W. G. Pearson Elementary aimed at focusing on aiding black males. Despite the gloomy weather, a good crowd ranging from parents to candidates for both the county commissioners and school board were in attendance, yet absent from the conversation were black men.

The community at-large can identify with the experience of sitting in meetings or attending a forum after which we could not tell for certain what decisions had been made, or how and why certain conclusions had been reached or how we can effectively contribute to the overall plan to elevate the challenges we so often meet to overcome.

We are all aware of the factors which lead to poor achievement, criminalization and death of young African-American males in our community, yet when are we going to move pass discussing the problem to actually solving it? Although Durham's meeting provided a wonderful opportunity to share experiences, attendees left the meeting without assignments, deadlines or even a road map.

Secondly, the key constituency the meeting was set to serve was absent. Of the attendees, only three were young black males. It is critical to have an open conversation with them to identify the challenges of their adolescences and to create alternatives that will create real and sustainable change for these young men. The deficiency of hope and opportunity in Durham communities leads to only more crime, violence and hopelessness.

Everyone is born with hope, aspiration and desire for greatness, yet the key to keeping an

individual bound in that natural-born spirit is to ensure those individuals have the necessary tools and support to help them achieve.

We have some serious challenges ahead, and we need effective solutions to prosper.

To reverse the trajectory of our young black males, we're going to need educated, professional and sincere citizens to make it their personal mission to serve as a mentor, resource or advocate for the young males wondering in search of direction. If we point them in the right direction, provide the needed resources and support with love, as a community we can end this trend.

We cannot continue to accept senseless crimes, gang activity and poverty to flourish in Durham communities, and rob our youth of their hope and dreams.

If we are to save young black males from dropping out of school, committing crimes and dying on Durham's streets, we must be bold and audacious in our solutions and in our commitment. We have to step outside of our comfort zones.

We can and must achieve this, if together we take back the streets of Durham and establish a consistent and genuine presence of compassion set forth by a bold and audacious plan within our communities. Then and only then will we create the new narrative of hope and prosperity that our young black men deserve.

The only means for a real paradigm shift in the state of our youth is to have a focused conversation to develop interdependent programs that truly serve our youth rather than the agendas of those that are involved in the process. Until we remove the personalities from our efforts, we will continue to garner the same results. Programs and services must be developed based on the needs identified by our youth, and the only means for gathering such data is having a focused conversation with our youth.

Only when we collectively understand the importance of working across sectors to address the complex challenges of our community will we begin to undo the knots of failure and begin to weave together viable and real solutions. We have to engage our youth or we run the risk of systemic failure. Our discussions must reach a productive end. Services and programs geared toward our youth must be developed and implemented with them. We must make the investment.

DeWarren Langley is a Durham activist.

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