

Teens, Loss and Grief

By Shantella Y. Sherman
Special to the NNPA from the
Afro-American Newspaper

For thousands of youth living in the D.C. metropolitan area the threat of violence creates constant fear. From random assaults and homicides positioned in the news media as commonplace, to the often-used refrain that victims were “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” a growing sense of fear and grief have come to characterize adolescent development. Think tanks like the Rand Corporation have found that inner-city communities often incur rates of post-traumatic stress (PTSD) symptoms among young people comparable to those seen in veterans of the Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars. Recognizing the symptoms of associated grief, depression, and chronic stress, however, is often clouded by stereotypes, leaving sufferers to go untreated.

Chronic stress and prolonged grieving cycles have a profound impact on the physical and mental well-being of young people. Sleeplessness, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, behavioral problems, and complaints of headaches or stomachaches are common. Among middle and junior high school students in urban school systems, 41 percent reported witnessing a stabbing or shooting in the past year; and 83 percent reported experiencing one or more traumatic events themselves. The epidemic of trauma-related stress and grief, however, becomes most evident in hospital visits and school disciplinary hearings.

Chaz Kohlreiser, a certified counselor

at the Wendt Center in D.C., works with young people, aged 6-21, suffering trauma as the result of losing friends to violence. He said treatment requires re-establishing their sense of community beyond the sidewalk memorials and candlelight vigils.

“Our young people are dealing with the loss of friends and classmates from back-to-back murders, with them sometimes witnessing those homicides and other times hearing graphic details about them. Their sense of trust, safety, and control are taken away,” Kohlreiser said. “Many have grown sick of going to the vigils and may be experiencing a sort of numbness that desensitizes their reactions.”

Kohlreiser said that clinical researchers are beginning to recognize that not feeling safe in their own communities keeps these young people from expressing the grief of loss, particularly if they come from rocky households where domestic violence or absenteeism already exist.

Such was the case with LaShawna Dun-



who lives near Stanton Road in Southeast. “Where do you go when everywhere you stand could be where you die?”

LaShawna, who lived with extended family members, said no one paid attention to her grief or fears until it turned into an-

manifest in acting out or fighting, similar to LaShawna’s.

“Creating a safe space that is grounded in confidentiality and void of judgment, shame, and criticism invites adolescents to express their feelings regarding their own mortality and consequently presents opportunities for growth and healing,” Phillips said. “Schools, parents, and community members should seek professional help for grieving teens if dysfunctional and non-developmentally appropriate behaviors become consistently present in their lives.”

Phillips said that assuming the passage of time will necessarily heal deep wounds is a false hope that blocks healthy individual development. “Intentionally connecting grieving adolescents with professional help can potentially break the cycle of violence in the African-American community and the community at-large,” Phillips said.

A growing sense of fear and grief have come to characterize adolescent development

can, who attended more than 20 friends’ funerals in one year and is currently being treated for PTSD-symptoms. “

I used to be afraid to step outside my door because so much was happening in my neighborhood, so I stayed in the house; then stray bullets started hitting the sides of the apartment building,” said LaShawna,

ger and she was suspended for fighting at school. “I was tired of being afraid and felt like I needed to get the world before it got me,” she said.

Robert T. Phillips, an Annapolis-based psychiatrist, said that as unresolved grief morphs into a more intensified complicated grief, adolescent behavioral issues may



LLOYD CENTER

summer fun days

2201 Lloyd Center
Portland, 97232
503.528.8515
lloydcenter.com



Minion Mania with Portland’s own favorite Minions

Saturday, August 15
11am-1pm

Live interactive performance featuring fun dances, crafts, prize wheel, games and a photo booth with your Minion friends.

West Mall Court



Meet “Dez” Calum Worthy from Disney’s Austin & Ally

Saturday,
September 12,
12-2pm

Bring a can of food to donate to the Oregon Food Bank and be entered to win a \$250 Lloyd Center Gift Card.



Join Z100 and The Oregon Food Bank

Saturday,
September 12,
12-2pm

Help us stuff 100 back-to-school backpacks with non-perishable nutritious food for hungry children right here in our community!

West Mall Court