

Strengthening Hope Conference Summary

I. Purpose & General info

Our “Strengthening Hope Together: A Community Response to Violence and Trauma” Conference was launched September 29, 2011 to explore and understand how community violence affects youth, families, and entire communities for the purpose of discussing best practices for violence prevention and intervention. Our objectives were: (1) increase understanding of the impact of community violence on youth and families; (2) highlight best practices for addressing community violence; and (3) provide support for individual and community level participation to address violence to improve the quality of life for youth and families affected. At our launch we represented: (1) youth and caregivers; (2) clinicians and counselors; (3) adults and professionals providing support to youth and families; and (4) professionals in charge of maintaining or enforcing community safety.

We wanted to provide an opportunity to provide hope to youth and families affected as well as clinicians in the field, clinicians wanting to help in the field, and professionals of various backgrounds that are involved and want to become involved to help with this detrimental crisis. We worked toward providing a space to foster acquiring knowledge, tools, resources, and new connections to take an active part in improving the lives of youth and families affected daily by the devastation of trauma and community violence.

II. Morning Session

Mariame Kaba, Executive Director of Project Nia gave the keynote address. She started off by referencing Carol Rose, key person in the social justice movement. Her talk consisted of three major points:

- 1) The relationship between violence and oppression in her life as she would “put herself on blast”
- 2) Describe what it takes to take care of ourselves and do this work
- 3) The impact of internalized oppression and violence

Ms. Kaba shares a story about a young Black male who was shot on 3/16/12 and (rendered brain dead) died on 3/18/12. Anthony’s nickname was Chickenhead and she talked about how his life mattered. He had dreams of joining the navy and producing music before his untimely death. Like so many youth in Chicago that have been victims of the violence.

She has done violence prevention and activism work for 20 years and has come in contact with so many youth that have feared dying or like Anthony have already died. Noted the Great Migration south to keep Black youth safe and have created an Underground railroad to protect our children. “May Anthony rest in Power.”

Ms. Kaba has been an anti-violence organizer. She spent time in Harlem where she also worked with youth as a teacher. One of her male students killed another student - Jill and she disclosed that she is a sexual assault victim.

So how do we take care of ourselves?

First, youth violence is a misnomer. Most violence comes from adults and is perpetrated on youth. What about poverty and the drug war?

The Wolf Story where the Grandfather tells his Grandson about the evil wolf who is angry, guilty, resentful and full of ego, and the good wolf who is loving, peaceful, hopeful and serene. So the Grandson asks his Grandfather which one wins and he tells him that the one you feed is the one that wins. So which one do our youth feed? Which one do I/you feed?

We have to be committed to each other and need each other whole. The work is hard and it takes its toll. So we need to:

- 1) Be kinder to each other and ourselves.
 - a. People mess up all the time
 - b. Oppression is multifaceted and interrelated
- 2) Create safe spaces but need to be uncomfortable too sometimes
- 3) Learn to recognize burnout and address it so we can be our best selves
- 4) Face internalized oppression squarely
 - a. The paperback *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity* by Aurora Levins Morales tells how unbearable internalized oppression is
 - b. Radical people want deep rooted change

She also noted questions from youth that have left her speechless. For example, one of her youth asked her "Would you be scared of me if you didn't know me Ms. K?" She had to think about it and told him that if she saw him at 11pm at night on the street and she was alone that she would be scared. She felt sad for saying that to him but he told her "That's why I love you Ms. K. You tell me the truth. I know how things go in this world. I would be scared of me too if I didn't know me. I'm a big Black man." After he left she sat there and realized she was crying because she too cannot escape the demonization of our young Black men.

Ms. Kaba ended her talk with a quote from Lupe Fiasco and this is an excerpt:

"....it's not about telling them how to live cause you have to unpack 60 or 70 years. They don't know why they're in the hood. I didn't know but they got stress..."

We do need to unpack the internalized oppression so we can heal and rebuild our communities. Thank you.

A. YOUTH-CAN overview

The Urban Youth Trauma Center sponsors the initiative: Youth Overcoming Urban Trauma & Healing: a Community Action Network (YOUTH-CAN). YOUTH-CAN is a network of community representatives striving to share information and mobilize responses to community violence as they impact youth and their families. The Strengthening Hope Conference was the first of many events to raise awareness about the needs of youth and families affected by violence, promoting the use of best practices for violence prevention and intervention, strengthening resilience, activation, and responsiveness among participants, and fostering collaboration and connectedness among community residents, professionals, and advocates.

B. Mario's presentation

Mario Lee, member of the youth advisory board of Chi Town Youth Voices at LaRabida Children's Hospital and consultant/advisory board member of YOUTH-CAN showed his video story "Stop the Violence" which illustrated images and stories of Chicago youth lost to violence. Following the video, there was commentary by Mario and Vikki Rompala, LCSW, formerly from the Chicago Trauma Center at LaRabida Children's Hospital. Mario has been inspired by his past experience of being a victim of community violence and through his efforts and this video, he encourages everyone to take action and support youth in need. Mario received a standing ovation and request for future showings.

C. Keynote speaker

III. Workshops

A. Safety

- **Workshop summary**
- **Breakout groups summary**

Workshop 1: Working Together to Make Our Communities Safe was led by Dr. Jaleel Abdul-Adil, Co-Director of the Urban Youth Trauma Center and co-facilitated by UYTC Staff and LaRabida Children's Hospital Partners. This workshop explored the impact and challenges to keeping communities, identified societal structures and ideas that support violence, recognized that everyone must be active to keep communities safe, and discussed the necessity to provide safe opportunities for youth to engage and participate in.

The different groups shared the following practices and gave suggestions on how to support safety: awareness (i.e. communicate with neighbors, block clubs, community watch, CAPs, participation in community-sponsored events, watch all children in the neighborhood, curfew, Community Watch Program (sponsored by CPS and CPD to provide safe passages to school), report suspicious activities; outreach (i.e. volunteering, mentoring, teaching coping/life/conflict resolution skills, mediation after violence); connection (i.e. youth/afterschool programs, discuss safety and parenting strategies, foster responsibility, challenge societal norms, make connections with youth) and education on trauma and the effects of trauma exposure.

Obstacles are: lack of involvement (i.e. parental involvement/"parental cliques", male role models, leaders, neighbors/community unity, police, connection between agencies and to faith-based organizations); fear of police and retaliation; lack of resources (i.e. support, funding, prevention/intervention programs, education on trauma for families and schools); personal factors (i.e. lack of empathy, family/work responsibilities, mental health issues); pervasiveness of hopelessness/helplessness; the acceptance of the culture of violence; lack of responsibility/empowerment from youth; disconnection within the community; and the lack of futuristic thinking.

Resources mentioned: intervention/support groups (i.e. CeaseFire, Mothers of Murdered Sons, Deborah Group, evidence-based); community-based organizations (i.e. safe zones, block clubs, neighborhood/community watch, CAPs, churches, Detention Alternative Programs, afterschool programs, mentoring, programs targeting at-risk youth, male mentors, violence prevention programs);

and community connectedness (i.e. watching the news, good supervision of youth, programs to teach life skills/conflict resolution skills, organizations and people concerned about reducing/ending community violence).

B. Living through and Moving on after trauma

- **Workshop summary**
- **Breakout groups summary**

Workshop 2: Living Through and Moving On After Community Violence was led by Dr. Liza Suarez, Co-Director of the Urban Youth Trauma Center and co-facilitated by UYTC Staff and LaRabida Children's Hospital Partners. This workshop explored the range of possible reactions to trauma and violence, discussed strategies to use to address experiences of trauma and community violence, and provided guidance on taking action to improve communities affected by trauma and community violence.

The participants represented trauma survivors, caregivers, probation officers, therapists/clinicians, advocates, professionals working with youth in the system, church representatives, intervention specialists, and student interns. The group was diverse in age, gender, race, and experience/educational levels.

There is a lack of knowledge and resources so it was requested to receive training on how to navigate using "best practices" when encountering barriers in the real world (i.e. lack of programs, traumatized children not referred for services, transportation issues, portable interventions/access of services, engaging parents/families). An emphasis was placed on the following needs: teaching meaning making; building resiliency; educating parents; skills training (i.e. relaxation, strengths-based, expressive/creative therapies); advocacy; and fostering futuristic thinking.

The following strategies/tools were shared to guide work with and to support youth that are affected by trauma and community violence: providing resources (i.e. teaching coping skills, connecting with youth, building relationships, role modeling, workshops for college bound youth); survivors talking to survivors; education (i.e. generational transmission of trauma); encourage envisioning a future.

Challenges to working with youth affected by community violence are: hopelessness; collaboration across disciplines; mental health stigmatization; overburdened systems of care and lack of professionals to help; exposure to multiple traumas; forgiveness; lack of family/parental involvement, re-entry into the home/community; poverty; addictions; acceptance/desensitization of community violence; lack of responsibility from the youth; and lack of direction in addressing the trauma (i.e. a lot of good intentions, ineffective interventions, frustration from lack of trauma training).

Strategies to support survivors and encourage them to help other survivors include: teaching self-care (i.e. yoga, expressing oneself, self-regulation, maintaining balance, exercise/sports groups); connect to resources; decrease stigma; promote skills (i.e. relaxation, coping techniques, role modeling, encouraging finding their "voice", creating meaning making); education/outreach (i.e. trauma effects, increasing collaboration across disciplines, support groups); and encouraging testimonies of survivors.

Working with trauma survivors has many effects: overwhelming, frustrating, traumatizing, stress, increased anxiety, feeling anger towards clients, physical stress, transference, hopelessness, and emotional burnout. However, working with trauma survivors helps to increase the understanding of experiencing community violence (i.e. empathy), gives hope to see the healing, and encourages one to want to learn more and do more to help.

Self-care strategies suggested were: taking time outs; talking; journaling/writing; physical activities (i.e. walking, working out, yoga); creating boundaries (i.e. turning work off, not taking work home, leaving work at a reasonable hour); attending church; supporting co-workers; meditation; massages; going to therapy; supervision; spending time alone; reading; music; connecting with family and friends; and praying.

IV. Afternoon session

A. Collaborative session

“Making Things Better: My Role and Yours” was an interactive session led by Dr. Liza Suarez and co-facilitated by UYTC Staff and LaRabida Children’s Hospital Partners. This session described and illustrated the 5 best practices for addressing community violence: (1) Developing safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their parents and caregivers; (2) Developing life skills in children and adolescents; (3) Promoting a safe environment in the community, (4) Changing rules and expectations in society (cultural norms) that support violence; and (5) Identifying, helping and supporting victims of community violence. After each best practice was introduced, participants from different sectors but located in similar areas around the city were asked to collaborate in small groups on how to use and implement each best practice.

B. Azim’s talk

Azim Ramelize grew up in New York City and was a member of a youth gang. On his 17th birthday he was shot in the back and decided to turn his life around so he enrolled in a community college where he completed an Associate’s degree then continued to complete his undergraduate studies and a degree in law. For over twenty years, Mr. Ramelize has developed programs for under-served youth and families plus over twelve years in policy making and defending the rights of youth. Mr. Ramelize gave a talk titled “Trauma and Ten Rules for Building A Communal Sustainable Client Friendly System.” The first rule is “do no harm” as he explained those that try to help the most sometimes harm the most because of a lack of understanding of what is needed by the youth and what the youth is experiencing.

C. Closing session

“Doing the Next Right Thing” by Reverend Karen Hutt, Pediatric Chaplain at Comer Children’s Hospital at the University of Chicago Medical Center. Our closing session provided by Reverend Hutt provided a connectedness to a shared mission. Reverend Hutt provided a moving and interactive closing session demonstrating the power of connectedness in the battle against reducing and ending community violence. Main themes from this session included: (1) The need for faith-based leaders to talk about the sensitive issue of community violence and the lack of resources to address this issue and (2) Addressing the role of substance abuse and the need for more attention focused on addressing these issues and their impact on the existence of community violence.

V. Evaluation efforts (e.g., individual action plans)

Participants were asked to complete Individual Community Action Plans to describe how they plan to support increased awareness about trauma and community violence, implement the 5 best practices described during the conference, become more active in participating in solutions within their community, and engaging in collaborations across sectors in order to address violence. Participants received several fact sheets and resources on trauma and community violence developed within UYTC.

We are proud and feel hopeful that the conference was well received! Of the 144 participants the following sectors were represented: 59 mental health providers and 85 non mental health community members, including youth and caregivers affected by violence (23), juvenile justice and law enforcement representatives (23), faith based groups and youth workers (31) and academics (8). Of special note, the conference was attended by Senator Jacqueline Collins of the 16th Legislative District of Chicago, Circuit Judge Michael Toomin, presiding judge of the Cook County Juvenile Court, and Commander Robert Hargesheimer of the Chicago Police Department.

VI. Next steps (e.g., quarterly calls, next year's conference, ongoing training, Facebook

The next Conference is scheduled for September 6, 2012. We look forward to seeing you there!