

## Man Turns Tragedy into Hope for Youth

Date: Tuesday, March 29, 2011

By:

It was a friend, a bullet and heartbreak that led David Miller to his passion: Saving young black men. Now, he and two friends have created a national organization and campaign to provide services such as academic enrichment for young males and support activities for single moms raising boys alone.

"We are dealing with the generation that has no idea who dad is," said Miller, 43. "When I was growing up, a lot of boys didn't live with their dad, but they knew who he was."

For Miller, the road to his passion began in the summer of 1989. The native Baltimorean was celebrating completion of his first year at Morgan State University. His best friend was home from Morehouse College in Atlanta, and the two of them went to a nightclub.

"Some guys tried to rob us, and because we didn't have the money, they started shooting at us," Miller recalled.

A bullet hit his friend in the back. Miller grabbed him — and held him in his arms until he took his last breath.

Miller's life - and what he hoped to do with it - changed forever. After his grief subsided, Miller said, "I started looking at community engagement strategies to reduce violence."

He taught school for two years in Baltimore, but was dismayed at what he considered the lack of attention and understanding given to African-American boys. In 1999, he and fellow teacher LaMarr Darnell Shields founded Urban Leadership Institute, which trains professionals who work with youth, as well as develops programs geared toward youth and families.

The organization also started PRAISE Academy, the Paul Robeson Academic International School of Excellence, a partnership between ULI, the University of Baltimore and the South East Youth Academy. The academy is a year-long Saturday enrichment program that includes mentoring, academic tutoring and field trips for middle-school boys.

Calick Wright, 14, attended PRAISE Academy and even at that young age realized the program was changing him.

"I think the program let me explore a lot of things I didn't know about myself," said Calick, who lives in Baltimore County, Maryland. "Usually I don't try different foods or things like rock climbing. I tried new things and liked them. I became more confident. They helped me to figure out what I want to do with my life. I want to be an electrical engineer."

The program even helped Wright get into a robotics program at Morgan.

Wright's mother, Bri Ward, said, "What I wanted for my son was a solid, mature base of African-American men who were upright and positive. My son's challenges were more social. He had the acumen to do well, but he wasn't consistent."

Ward said the academy made sure the boys studied, took them to museums, taught them to give back by having them clean communities and "even taught them how to tie their ties." There were also parenting workshops that Ward called "amazing."

Meanwhile, one day, Miller got a call from a stranger named Matt Stevens, a teacher at a Rutgers University outreach program for inner city high school boys, who had heard about ULI's work from one of Miller's friends. The two met when Stevens invited Miller to Rutgers to speak.

Before the weekend was over, they had outlined a book that included practical advice and resources for single mothers. The book, "Raising Him Alone - Things Black Women Can Do to Raise Boys to Be Men," was published in 2009.

They knew from their personal experiences that single mothers needed various forms of support to be able to raise healthy, successful young men. With a grant from the Open Society Institute - Campaign for Black Male Achievement, the two held focus groups with single mothers. They found many mentoring and rites of passage programs that were doing good work with

the boys.

"But we wondered who was working with the parents," said Miller.

Under the umbrella of ULI, they launched the **Raising Him Alone** campaign, coming up with tools to assist mothers while reducing the likelihood of sons dropping out of school or going to prison. The campaign includes a bi-weekly email blast to some 13,000 moms nationwide and a Facebook page called Single Mothers Raising Boys Discussion Group that allows mothers around the world an opportunity to talk with one another about mutual issues.

For some women, the campaign has been an answer to their prayers.

"We have open discussions on Facebook. Moms just vent," said April Ashe, an Internet radio host who lives in Rahway, N.J. "We get advice also from older women who say they raised boys alone. All of it helps."

Ashe, whose husband had been abusive to both her and her son, found the group online while doing some research to find help for her son with anger issues. She posted her problem on the Facebook page and also called Miller at the contact number.

"I was surprised that he answered himself," said Ashe. "He gave me Matt's number and told me to contact Dr. Robert Johnson and make an appointment for my son. I called on a Tuesday and had an appointment for the following Saturday."

Robert L. Johnson is dean of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and the director of the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine. He is also a professor of psychiatry and psychology who runs a counseling and enrichment program that specializes in assisting African-American males.

A year later, Ashe said, her son still sees Johnson regularly.

As a social services coordinator at Sharswood Townhouses II in Philadelphia, Regina Dawley asked Raising Him Alone to conduct workshops in her community for the mothers and the young men.

"I've found the workshops are very helpful to the young male children in my community. It gives them hope. Matt really cares about the children, and they and their parents can see it," said Dawley. "I have a lot of single mothers, and they spend so much time angry, and they pass it on to the children. Matt has exercises that help them release that anger."

While the program to help women was growing, the men started hearing people complain that they "were promoting single parenthood as something good, and that men weren't needed," said Stevens, 45, a father of two. "That is far from the truth."

In fact, the men said, a significant number of the 60 or so calls they got each week were from moms asking for help in getting dads to act like fathers. So the men created **Changing Fatherhood**, a campaign with a goal of creating ways to use community forums, workshops, support group initiatives, social media applications and other means to bring fathers back into the folds of their families and communities.

"We have created a virtual portal men can turn to," said Miller. "We're looking at co-parenting models, teaching parents how to do it."

This summer, the men will work with community partners in Baltimore, Newark, Philadelphia and Chicago, hitting high traffic areas like barber shops and beauty salons to pass out information about Changing Fatherhood.

"We want to say to people it is time to look more critically at how we are raising children," Miller said.

Stevens agrees. "At the end of the day, both of the campaigns — Raising Him Alone and Changing Fatherhood - were built to build strong, healthy black families."