UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
ASSEMBLING THE PIECES

An African-American perspective on community and family violence

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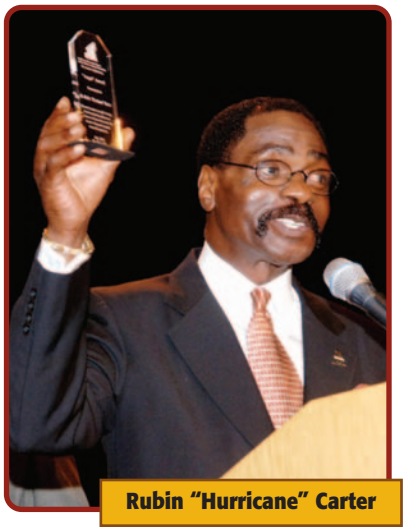
IDVAAC 2005 Forum:
Safe Return from prison depends on dealing with issues of anger and control

Every year, 600,000 men – 45 percent of whom are African-American – leave the prison system, and seek to reestablish themselves in their families and communities. The challenges that all involved face were the subject of IDVAAC's July 2005 forum: "Safe Return: Issues in

SAFE RETURN

Addressing Domestic Violence Among Men and Their Families from the Penitentiary to the Community".



Rubin "Hurricane" Carter

Among the questions up for discussion: What support will wives, intimate partners and children need to successfully cope? What strategic alliances can be formed with community-based programs and battered women's and parole programs to keep women and children safe? And how can all involved address the needs of the men seeking to reestablish themselves in a non-abusive way beyond prison walls?

A dynamic and knowledgeable group of professionals convened at the University of Minnesota campus in St. Paul last July to explore those questions and develop strategies for change. As conference attendees found out, helping those leaving the prison system identify and deal with the anger they feel is crucial to breaking the spiral of violence.

Anger must be confronted

Keynote Speaker Rubin "Hurricane" Carter was both articulate and impassioned as he spoke about his experiences both in and beyond the prison system. Convicted of triple murder and sentenced to three life terms for crimes which he has continually maintained his innocence, Carter spent over 20 years in prison before his release in 1988 after his case gained international attention and suppressed evidence was finally brought to light.

A film version of Rubin Carter's story, 1999's "*The Hurricane*", stars Denzel Washington in a gripping portrayal of Carter, with Vicellous Reon Shannon as the Brooklyn teen whose chance encounter with Carter's biography set in motion the events that finally saw justice done.

Continued next page

Executive Director's Message– There is a better way for men released from prison today

Dr. Oliver J. Williams

By Dr. Oliver J. Williams, executive director

Hope and safety were the recurring themes of our July conference on returning prisoners to their families and to their communities with assurance that abusive behavior is no longer a threat. This hope is based on the belief that real change can occur among some men if prisoners are provided with the right kinds of support during their prison stays and afterwards.

People who exhibit abusive behavior can change, but it requires intentional intervention. To increase the possibility that change can occur, there are modifications that we need to make in our criminal justice system, parole programs and community services.

This issue of *Assembling the Pieces* recaps what experts on safe return of prisoners to communities have to say on this topic and features our dynamic keynote speaker Hurricane Carter, who points out that we were not born "angry, prejudiced, hateful or filled with other illusions." He advises his fellow African Americans to "take that jacket off."

Our next conference

We're already planning our next annual conference. The focus of that event will be Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence in the African-American Community. It will be in Atlanta this winter. See the back cover of this newsletter and our web site for more details.

These conferences are rare opportunities for all of us dedicated to ending domestic violence in the African-American community to share our stories and solutions. We know you have a lot to contribute. And we look forward to seeing you there.

IDVAAC 2005 Forum: SAFE RETURN

Mike Bobbitt, Hurricane Carter, Dr. Oliver J. Williams and Mitchell Davis.

His story is about anger and violence – the anger he brought to prison and struggled with throughout his years of ordeal, and the violence that being in prison not only creates but requires to survive.

His message is that anger and violence can be overcome.

> "First, we have to understand what anger is," he said. "We were not born angry.... we were born into it. This is a jacket that we wear. But you can take off that jacket," he said, flipping his suitcoat off his shoulders to the applause of the crowd.

Carter's message was received enthusiastically by 300 audience members from departments of corrections, research institutes, faith-based programs and criminal justice and domestic violence programs throughout the United States.

A compelling and inspired speaker, Carter went on to stress that anger does not magically dissipate upon an inmate's release, and that newly released prisoners and parolees face many challenges, including a strong resistance to control after years of little or no control in a hostile environment. Without support and intervention, that need for control is often taken out on those they live with.

Yet, he reminded his audience that the incarcerated must confront the anger in themselves, in prison, in order to successfully rejoin their families and communities.

"What prisoners need to understand, is that you need to deal with yourself while you are still in prison, and not wait until the prison doors are open to try to straighten yourself up. Because what you are doing is bringing prison outside of the prison and into your home. And that's where the violence is."

IDVAAC Steering Committee member Dr. William Oliver suggested that relationship classes be offered to men in prison to help them learn to deal with uncomfortable emotions and to learn how to "negotiate change."

Support programs make a difference

The theme of dealing with anger, and the need for culturally aware support programs, was echoed by Men's Panelists Pernell Brown and Warren Edwards, who spoke candidly and movingly about their own experiences in a discussion on the topic "Reentry and Domestic Violence: Issues for Men Who Have Been in Prison and/or on Parole."

The youngest of 14 children, Brown idolized his gang member brothers and didn't expect to live past 30. He had friends die in his arms, went to prison for attempted murder, and later, domestic assault. He told conference attendees that it wasn't until he was introduced to the African-American Parole Program after his release that he was finally able to break the pattern.

"The program didn't just work with me - it worked with my wife, in the simple fact that she knew who my p.o. was, and we would go to the group together, and anything we had going on, she'd tell the p.o.. he joked. But, on a more serious note, he also said he owes his life to the program.

Pernell Brown, substance abuse counselor with ASAP Treatment Services at Turning Point in Portland.

SAFE RETURN

> **"The African American program is why I'm sitting here right now....[it] really burnt the truth into me about what it means to be black, what it means to be a man, what it means to be responsible."**

Today, Brown mentors other ex-offenders through the program, which is very close to his heart. "To be able to give back to the program where you come from is very rewarding. I couldn't ask for anything more."

Analyzing his childhood in Harlem, Edwards recalled that he never learned "to verbalize what I felt, so it always turned into something physical." That didn't change, from his years in the military, where he served time for assault, to a murder conviction, to his efforts to control his intimate partners through abuse and intimidation.

Joleen Jones, domestic violence, anger management and violence prevention counselor at African American Family Services in Minneapolis.

Edwards understands why violence happens, and that issues of control and shame are at the heart of the problem. "All my role models were men in control," he recalled. "I had been controlled for 10 years in prison, so I wasn't going to come home and let anybody control me." Less than a year after his release, he was sent back to prison for domestic assault.

He also spoke about the people who helped turn his life around, through positive reinforcement and by calling on his better self instead of blaming and shaming. "My wife truly taught me what it was to be a man. She told me, 'You come from kings, and you're out here beating on queens.' She saw the potential in me. I never heard that before."

Edwards also recalled an older man he met at a bar who told him: "You deserve better than this." At first he didn't understand what he meant. Now he does.

Women: share your stories, take control

Women's panelists Benita Presley and Joleen Jones offered insights about how women involved with men in prison or on parole often remain emotionally dependent on, and controlled by, their partners. Both women shared painful memories of years in abusive relationships and their struggles to break free.

Victim advocate and domestic violence consultant Benita Presley not only witnessed her father beat her mother, but endured decades of abuse from several partners who threatened to kill her or her family if she left. She also spoke from her experience about how her imprisoned husband used manipulation and emotional abuse to maintain control of their relationship.

"I felt this obligation to tell him everything that was going on with me so he could feel comfortable being locked up. I was sending him $1000 a month, and spending $800 on phone bills," she recalled. "He was pimping me from the penitentiary." At the same time, she believed strongly in her partner's potential, and felt she could "save" him by always being there for him.

Benita Presley, a victim's advocate and former domestic violence specialist at Project Network in Portland.

Domestic violence and anger management counselor Joleen Jones cautions that women need to take care of themselves first. According to Jones, women want so much for their men to change, that they believe it to be happening even when it's clear that it isn't. But it falls to the women to be strong and to demand the respect they deserve, or end the relationship. In working with women in these struggles, she has seen how talking to other women in the same situation can help.

"Women need to have empowerment. They need to have a supportive system ... where they can sit with other women and get information about what's going on so they don't feel so alone. It's such an important key, to let her know and see that there are alternatives."

Meet Tiombe Preston:
A feminist perspective on domestic violence

Tiombe Preston began having feminist inclinations after graduating from high school in Long Beach, Calif. where she lived with her family. It was during her college experience at Scripps College in Claremont, Calif., however, where she realized her destiny of working with victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Course work in the areas of psychology and women studies helped Preston create a foundation for her future professional career.

Education

Preston began to learn and understand the tragic situations of victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse during an internship while completing her bachelor's degree at Landmark Medical Center, a locked psychiatric hospital. Her two-part internship included drama therapy and a women's group. All of her clients had chronic, severe symptoms of psychiatric disorders and mental illness. "Many of these women had families, and were unable to see and spend time with their own children," says Preston. After just a short time with the women's group, the interns, including Preston, realized that all of the women in the group facility were not only diagnosed with chronic, severe mental illness, but were also victims and survivors of sexual and partner abuse, which was never before mentioned.

"Victims and survivors of sexual and domestic abuse go through a lot— rape, sexual abuse, and sexual torture. These issues need to be bluntly talked about if we want them to stop."

After her first professional job as a counselor for women victims of sexual abuse, Preston decided to further her education at California State University, Long Beach, where she received a master's degree in counseling, with a specialization in the areas of marriage and family counseling. For the past eight years, Preston has been working with survivors of sexual assault and sexual and domestic abuse. Currently, she operates her own practice as a feminist therapist.

Current issues

According to Preston, when the community, including professors, social service providers, courts, attorneys, judges, therapists, etc. operate on the myth that batterers can still be good fathers without proof of intervention, we are putting many survivors of domestic violence in jeopardy and subjecting children to more abuse. "What often happens is any allegation of abuse by a mother is held against her. In fact, being a survivor of abuse has been used to take children away from a mother; but the person who perpetrated the violence can have custody?"


Tiombe Preston

Women are often blamed when a family falls apart and held responsible for "keeping the family together" and "protecting the kids." Preston believes that domestic and sexual violence will end when society rejects the misogynist (characterized by the hatred of women) belief that women belong to men, including being sexually available at all times. "We must ask why he rapes her, why he beats her, why he verbally abuses her—not why does she stay?" says Preston. "If the first thing society says is 'Why does she stay?' then we are not in a good place to look at domestic violence."

A positive example

Preston uses her expertise in sexual abuse and assault to help benefit IDVAAC. She feels her purpose is to bring awareness of sexual abuse and assault to African-American communities and all communities in the United States. "Victims and survivors of sexual and domestic abuse go through a lot— rape, sexual abuse, and sexual torture. These issues need to be bluntly talked about if we want them to stop," Preston says.

Being involved with IDVAAC has helped Preston advance the theories of domestic abuse in California. She believes that men need to take a bigger, active, visible role in the fight against domestic violence. She seeks collaboration with men in the anti-violence movement. "Men need to get the education and information out there in our communities. Women have been leading this work forever, and that has to be honored and respected, but women can't stop sexual abuse and domestic violence because they are rarely the perpetrators," she says.

Using IDVAAC's values and visions as an example in California encourages more and more men to become involved in the fight against domestic violence. "While there is a lot of violence in South East Los Angeles County, there are many small pockets of good work here," says Preston. I use the IDVAAC program as an example of how men can do this kind of visible work here in California. The IDVAAC program is helping me to lead the way."

Visitation Centers are *Safe Havens* for children and their parents

Visitation centers are important institutions that help parents, who have been abusive, change for the better. Human services organizations and visitation centers across the United States engage in ongoing efforts to develop new and improved programs and services to better serve those who need it most. The *Safe Havens* project is a prime example of a program designed to rethink and improve current principles and services utilized today in visitation centers around the nation.

Art Room

Safe Havens project

The federal *Safe Havens*: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice to support supervised visitation and safe exchange options for families with a history of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. It will help fund vital research to identify positive and negative themes that exist in current programs offered by visitation centers. The grant was awarded in response to an application submitted by the Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention & Treatment Board (MDVPTB), in collaboration with the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO).

The goal of *Safe Havens* project, which began in 2002, is to provide a safe and positive environment for parents who have been abusive to their children. The project seeks to provide responsive and meaningful interventions with families in the context of domestic violence. It aims to eliminate the risk that children will be physically or sexually abused and/or abducted when coming into contact with an abuser, reduce the trauma and anxiety to children, ensure a measure of safety for their mother, and provide a safe and neutral environment, and a conflict-free, non-judgmental visitation.

Theater

"A primary goal of the Safe Havens project is to protect battered women and children when they are most vulnerable, right after separation from an abuser," says Julie Tilley, managing director of Praxis International, a nonprofit research and training organization that works toward the elimination of violence in the lives of women and children. "In the past, visitation centers were set up as child safety centers and didn't account for the dynamics of battering," she says. "Exchanging children between parents has been more common than visitations and most shelters had no idea or knowledge about what was going on with the family outside of the center. We are working to change that."

Now, visitation centers are becoming part of a community collaborative to help battered children and their parents feel safe and to help the batterer (primarily fathers) change his actions for the better. "Parents have the right to see their children and children have the right to see their parents," says Tilley. "Visitation centers provide a good experience and a comfortable, safe setting for both the children and parents."

Designing safe interventions

There are many aspects of domestic violence that need addressing when designing safe interventions. Visitation center staff understand the period after separation is very dangerous for battered women and their children. Battering has a deep impact on a victim's cognitive, psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being, and social positions such as class, race, mental illness and alcohol and drug use often make victims more vulnerable to harm. Staff members work with these issues to create a safe, comfortable, and relaxing environment for all involved.

One way to ensure a safe environment for both parents and children is to have supervised visits. "Visits between fathers and children have a range of supervision levels depending on personal circumstances and past abuse," Tilley says. These levels range from low to high supervision. "An example of low supervision is several families gathered together in an open room where the children are free to play and interact with their father and other families. High supervision occurs when a staff member remains in a confined area with one father and his children during an entire visit," she says.

There are a number of reasons why a father may have supervised visits with his children. "In some cases, the mother is so afraid of the father that she is in hiding," explains Tilley. "Supervised visits make sure the father is not manipulating the children to tell him where their mother is hiding."

Continued next page

In many cases, however, fear is not the main reason for supervised visits. "Perhaps the father never cared for his children before and does not know how to take care of his young child or infant," Tilley says. "In cases like this, supervised visits make certain the father is properly feeding and caring for his child. Or, maybe the father has an alcohol problem and the mother is worried about her children getting into a car with him. In these types of situations, supervised visitations make the most sense," she says.

For some centers, the transition from supervised to unsupervised visits only happens after a court decision. Other centers, however, have a say in whether or not a father should be allowed an unsupervised visit with his children. "Although this is not a common practice, some visitation center staff develop relationships with the courts and are allowed to make recommendations for what they feel is right or not right regarding a father's visits with his children," Tilley says.

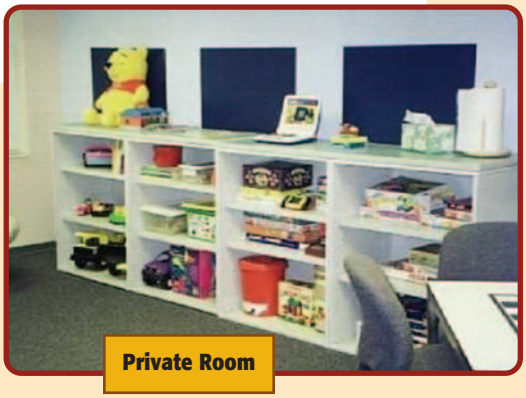
Issues for people of color

There are a wide range of reasons why communities of color may not utilize a visitation center and its services. "There are cases where members of communities of color choose not to use the court systems because of racial biases; they feel going to court is too risky. Therefore, battered mothers and children remain in the home and live with the everyday domestic violence and abuse," says Tilley.

Language barriers can also cause individuals to turn away from visitation centers because of communication issues for those who do not speak English. Others may be turned off by the white dominance of some centers and feel uncomfortable in that particular kind of environment.

Recommendations for your community

Often times, battered women who have used visitation centers in the past reported that their needs and the needs of their children were not met. "In order to build a well-designed visitation center, human services and domestic violence professionals need to get out in our communities and talk to the women who have been abused to find out exactly what they need and want in a visitation center," Tilley says. "The most important factor is designing a center that meets the real needs of those who need it most, abused women and children."



Private Room

Another important issue is designing visitation centers that meet specific cultural needs. "We need to take a step back and ask ourselves, 'What would a center look like if we built it from the ground up and designed it with a particular culture in mind? What would their specific needs and wants be?" says Tilley. "It is important to design a center where all people feel invited and comfortable because this type of environment helps support the change process. The last thing we want is for people to look at visitation centers as another policing environment for their people."

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Demon Chased, Angel Watched

By Terry R. Matthews with Lynne P. Woodfork-Matthews

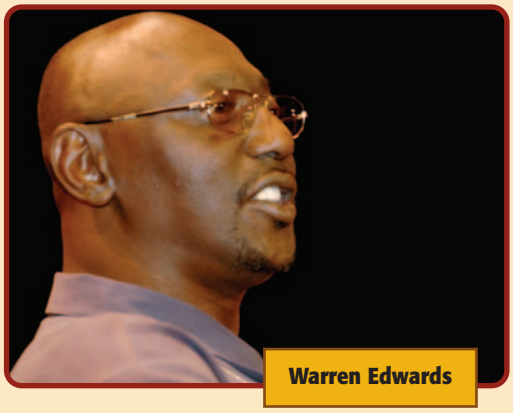
Book review: Biography follows path to transformation

By Warren Edwards

In this honest and compelling biography, Terry Matthews chronicles his experiences with the spiritual forces that brought him first to the brink of death, and ultimately, to a life of purpose and joy.

Part 1 of the book, *Demon Chased – Living a Life of Fear*, takes us through his childhood where he suffered sexual abuse and racial discrimination, to teenage rebellion and forays into crime. As he searches for ways to deal with the pain, forces of darkness that he later recognizes as his demons – fear, anger, confusion, and arrogance – take him on a downward spiral through self-destruction: drug use and addiction, estrangement from his family, failed relationships, lost jobs, homelessness, and finally, hitting bottom.

In the early part of the book, you are struck by Matthews' seeming paranoia – everyone is out to get him, every misstep is the trickery of others. Part of this was due to the real persecution by his corrupt government employer, a major focus of the story. But he also sees his paranoia as driven by his demon companions, fear and anger. He fears and is preoccupied with death from a young age. He flirts with death, taking ever more drugs and exposing himself to greater danger. Yet he is afraid to change because he fears losing the things that make him who he is, a death of another kind. Who would he be without his life as he knows it? Who would he be without other people's expectations?

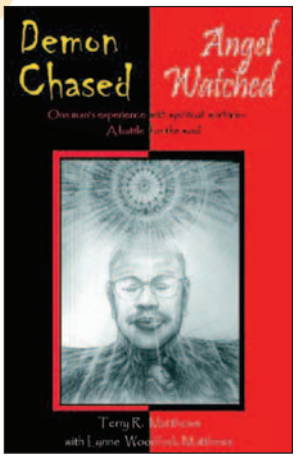


Warren Edwards

As the book progresses, so does his persistent feeling that something else is meant for him. In Part 2, *Angel Chased – Replacing Fear with Faith*, he begins to let go of the belief that he can control his life, and surrenders to the will of God. At the same time, he comes to recognize the poor choices he has made in life as symptoms of larger spiritual issues – demonic influences that fueled his insecurities and fears.

While he experienced many setbacks, his successes began to reveal God's larger plan, and the downward spiral now began to circle upward. He begins to see that if he only has faith, God will guide him and provide for him. He also realizes that God allows his people free will to choose between good and evil. Choosing good leads to his deliverance. It is this choice that ultimately is the source of his faith and hope.

In his dedication, Matthews states that he wrote this book for his children, and as a testament to his faith. And though he writes from an African-American perspective, the audience for this book should include people of every color – its personal nature and powerful message deserves a wide audience.



In particular, it is a must-read for anyone who is caught up in similar cycles of addiction, abuse and criminal activity – they will recognize themselves and be moved by this book. It is also sure to help friends and family members gain new understanding of how the people they love come to be overtaken by addictions and dangerous lifestyles.

Matthews went on to enter the ministry and is now a sought-after Christian motivational speaker. But even non-Christians will appreciate his universal truths. One such truth is that everyone has a past. But you have to deal with your past mistakes; you have to get past the denial and look at yourself honestly if you want to grow spiritually. Another is that we all spend so much time trying to fit in and adapt ourselves to other people's expectations. Speaking of how these issues affected his youth, Matthews shows us that it is important to do things for ourselves, to trust our own instincts.

Matthews tells a parable at the end of the book that sums up his message in another way. He was searching for a conclusion to his memoir, and was coming up dry. One day he felt something telling him to watch one of his daughter's videos. In it, a caterpillar named Hermie is worried about being common, unlovely, and is not satisfied with the explanation that there's more to come. Desperate for life as a butterfly, he tries to hurry the process, with disastrous results. His wise friend Wormie points out that it's okay to just be a caterpillar. It's okay to be where you are. Conclusions, like everything, take time to develop. Transformation awaits – you just have to have faith.

Warren Edwards is a counselor and advocate for African-American men struggling with addictions and domestic abuse. Founder of Feeding the Least to Increase the Peace, he lives in St. Paul.

SAVE THE DATES!

IDVAAC's annual conference will explore how to help victims heal from sexual assault

Domestic violence and its impact on the African-American community has received increasing attention during recent years. Yet less is known about the impact of sexual assault on our community. Our winter conference in Atlanta will explore the issues and discuss how communities can confront this issue. It will focus on how to support survivors and confront perpetrators, with the overall goal of developing communities of support and healing. Stay tuned to our web site for conference details. www.dvinstitute.org

ATP IDVAAC

next issue

Meet Ulester Douglas of Men Stopping Violence in Atlanta
Healthy recoveries from domestic violence • Overview of Atlanta conference • And more . . .

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