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After Tragedy, Triumph for a D.C. Neighborhood

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The summer headlines were impossible to ignore: seven homicides, 16 robberies, 20 assaults with dangerous weapons. The violence in Ward 5's Trinidad neighborhood left residents sad, frightened and angry.

But now that the checkpoints are gone and the media's attention has turned elsewhere, an untold story -- and a different set of numbers -- are emerging: thirty children using dance to express their feelings. Twenty girls learning to view themselves as beautiful. One child whose journal reveals a deep hurt that she's learning, slowly, to let go of.

This is happening because of a new partnership that we have forged with the [D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation](#) to bring outstanding after-school programs to the Trinidad neighborhood. Instead of being based at schools and catering only to students from those schools, the programs have begun operating out of the Trinidad Recreation Center on Childress Street NE.

After-school programs in recreation centers aren't new. But this new partnership offers something not seen before in neighborhoods throughout the city.

The nonprofits WE CAN (Washington Enrichment and Cultural Arts Network), Girls Inc. and CityDance are providing high-quality programs that draw children from all neighborhoods in Ward 5. From 3 p.m. on, as children from Ivy City to Florida Market come together at this recreation center, a very different picture of Trinidad surfaces.

In the WE CAN classrooms, a 15-year-old girl with a perceived "attitude problem" has been given the gift of journal writing. Staffers learned that she'd been shot once in her own back yard; her best friend died in a house fire; and her favorite uncle had been murdered.



A memorial to a child killed in the Trinidad neighborhood this summer.
(By Katherine Frey -- The Washington Post)

At 15, Johnetta already had attended 19 funerals. Then her neighborhood became a war zone this summer. No wonder she was angry. But the after-school program is making huge headway.

Johnice Galloway Miller, who runs WE CAN at the Trinidad Recreation Center, says of the potential honor roll student: "Through her journal writing, she is able to let go of a lot of pain, let go of a lot of things in her life." At Girls Inc., 20 girls are grappling with the media's definition of beauty -- often at odds with their own self-images. One 11-year-old girl, who struggles with her weight, told staffers that she refused to look in mirrors because she so disliked what she saw. So, the staff brought in mirrors for each girl, and every day, each girl looks at her reflection and says aloud how beautiful she is. Since then, the shy 11-year-old has joined in, for the first time, on after-school jogs and is participating more. One staffer says: "She's learning not to see herself the same way she once did."

The openness of the recreation center has produced unexpected results as well. Fifth-grade football player Franklin wandered into the CityDance hip-hop class by accident. He liked it so much that he ditched football to come every day. But the dance teachers couldn't figure out why his behavior was disruptive.

Because of the recreation center's central location and open-door policy, his mother felt free to come in one afternoon and explain: His sister died three years ago. After that, he "shut down." But since coming to the hip-hop program, he's doing better in school and is more connected to his family. He's excited about dancing, and his mother is grateful.

These are the untold stories occurring after school at the Trinidad Recreation Center, thanks to a partnership of people who remained after the barricades came down and the television vans rolled away. Together, we're helping a battered neighborhood heal.

-- Millicent D. Williams

Washington

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