

the **Stand** south side news

www.mysouthsidestand.com

Syracuse, NY

November 2010 issue 6

FREE

COLTS HUDDLE

Team brings together
South Side youth who
play on Kirk Park Colts

grand parents

Teenagers learn
traditional values from
another generation

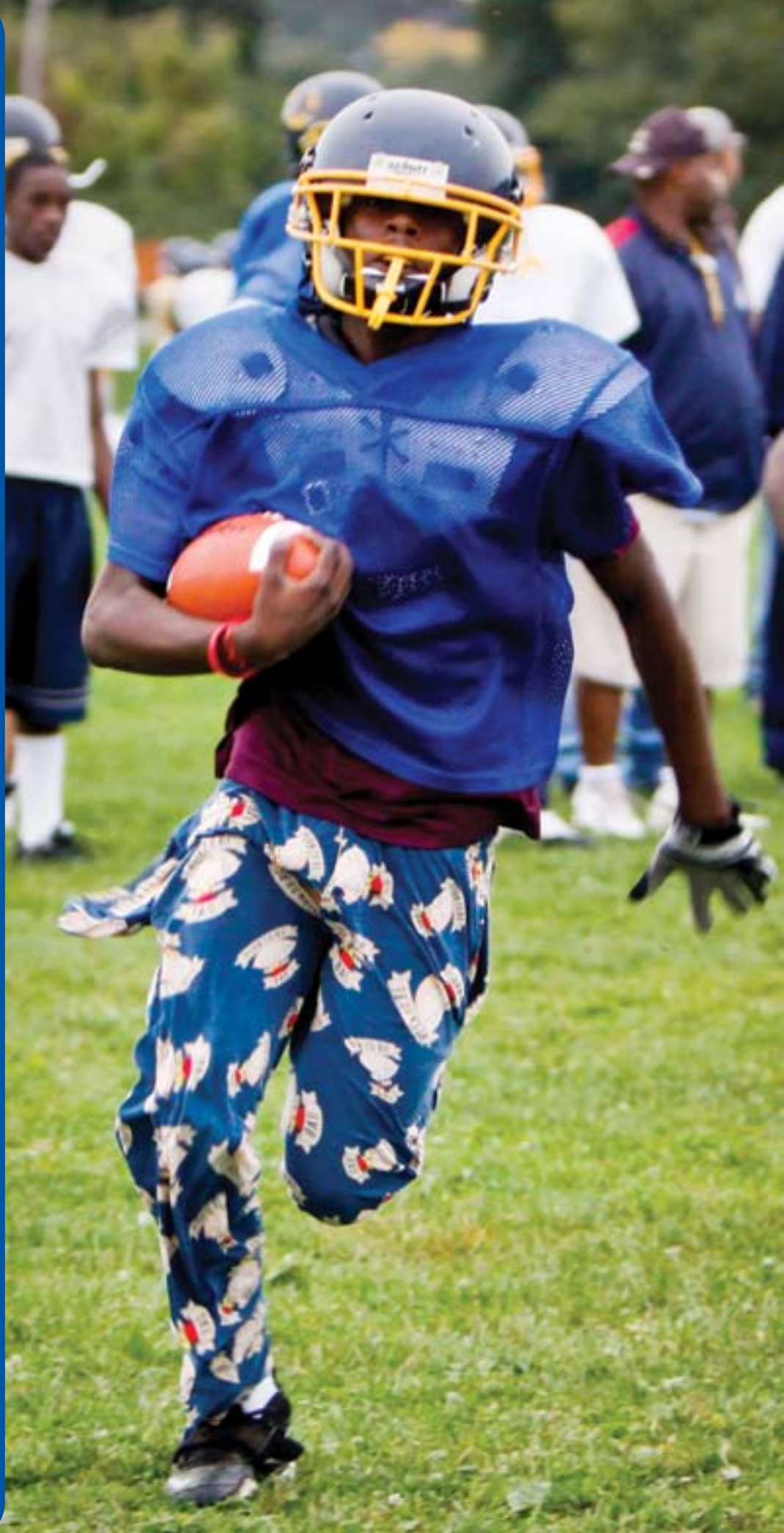
CHURCHES ACT OUT FAITH

THE HANDS THAT FEED

Valley Worship Center food pantry helps put a stop to local hunger

Abandoned houses

A plan is in the works for people
to turn vacant houses into homes



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- 4 COMMUNITY** | See how the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency works to rehabilitate vacant houses by finding people with the best improvement plan.
- 6 COMMUNITY** | Last month, the Valley Worship Center fed 250 people. Learn how the group fights to combat hunger locally.
- 6 FEATURES** | The Williams family deals with the financial and social challenges of raising their three grandchildren. Read how this grandfather and grandmother work together.
- 10 SPORTS** | Read how the Kirk Park Colts football and cheerleading teams instill values and bring the South Side community together with youth sport involvement.
- 12 CHURCH** | From Shakespeare to "Luther," check out how Atonement Lutheran Church revives The Word of God on stage.
- 13 CHURCH** | Don't miss Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church's dance team, "Echoes of Joy," perform "Hoods Heading to Heaven," an original play about getting youth back to church.
- 15 BUSINESS** | Tyrone Cannon built his business out of cans and bottles. Find out how he made trash into treasure —1 cent at a time.
- 16 BUSINESS** | Irvin "Bongo" Hanslip uses his culture to support his family and inspire a Caribbean flavor in the South Side restaurant, Jerk Hut.
- 18 SCHOOL AND YOUTH** | Linda Dunn takes her job as a teacher to the next level with love and care. See her impact on her students at Danforth Magnet Middle School.

■ Cover photography of a Kirk Park Colt player by Mackenzie Reiss

CALENDAR | NOVEMBER

What: Film Screening "What If? Third Ward TX"
When: 7 to 9 p.m. Monday, Nov. 15
Where: Red House Arts Center, 201 S. West St., Syracuse
Cost: Free admission
More Details: "Third Ward TX" tells the story of Project Row Houses — a unique creative venture started when a group of African-American artists clean up around a row of condemned shotgun houses and hold a 'Drive By' exhibition of paintings on the fronts of the abandoned homes.
Contact: To learn more, call (315) 425-0405 or visit <http://theredhouse.org/>

What: Tomorrow's Neighbors Today Area 4 Valley Meeting
When: 7 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 10
Where: Bob Cecile Community Center, 176 W. Seneca Turnpike, Syracuse
Cost: Free and open to the public
More Details: TNT Area 4 Valley Planning Council regularly meets at 7 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month at the Bob Cecile Community Center. South Side TNT regularly meets at 7 p.m. the first Monday of each month at Southside Innovation Center, 2610 S. Salina St. Meetings are subject to change if necessary.
Contact: For more information or to be added to our e-mail list, contact TNT Coordinator Babette Baker at bbaker@ci.syracuse.ny.us or call (315) 448-8173.

HOW TO BUY AN AD

If interested in **running an ad**, contact Ashley Kang to request a **rate card** and discuss options by e-mailing Ashley@mysouthsidedstand.com or by calling (315) 443-8664. The Stand's rate card can also be found online at www.mysouthsidedstand.com

This month, we share more stories about local people and issues affecting the South Side.

In two business stories, we take a look at the success of Jerk Hut, a longtime restaurant on the South Side that is surviving these tough economic times. We also feature Tyrone Cannon's new recycling business, which includes door-to-door pickup service, and has expanded thanks to word-of-mouth publicity.

We talk with a resident whose home stands between two abandoned houses. She and her family have refurbished their home, and she looks forward to a new plan that would allow people to bid on and move into vacant buildings in the area.

In sports, we look at how the Kirk Park Colts continue their season after their first game was suspended at half time because of a shooting at the park. That game resumed nearly two weeks later.

And our story on Linda Dunn, a dedicated teacher, was inspired by reporter Jamese McConico's personal experience she had as a youth. McConico turned to one of her teachers after a traumatic event at home and later followed in that teacher's footsteps (read her column on page 20). Dunn is representative of just such a teacher.

You can read even more South Side stories, which are offered each week online. At the end of September, we had our first scoop when The Stand reported that Syracuse Police Chief Frank Fowler had commissioned a study on racial profiling in addition to the one being performed by the city. The Stand published that news before any other Syracuse-area news outlet.

The website is also a space for community members to leave comments on stories and to hold discussions about South Side issues in our newly developed forum section. The forum can be accessed by visiting our home page at www.mysouthsidestand.com and clicking on the Forum tab at the top of the page. The forum has two sections — one for general comments and one set up as a free classifieds service where community members can post items for sale.

We ask participants in the forum to be respectful and to follow The Stand's established Community Standards. We expect all participants to: treat all community members with respect; refrain from posting commercial advertisements, spam, personal information of others and unrelated or irrelevant information; and refrain from profanity.

Now turn the page or click online to read about your local community and the great things people do to make it better.

Ashley Kang



UPCOMING EVENTS

Nov. 13

November Workshop

Full-Day Multimedia Workshop
Using Soundslides

10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday,
Nov. 13

Held at the South Side
Innovation Center, 2610 S.
Salina St.

Must RSVP; limited to 10
participants. To RSVP, call (315)
443-8664 or e-mail ashley@mysouthsidestand.com

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor can be mailed to The Stand at:

South Side Innovation Center
South Side Newspaper
Project, Inc.
2610 S. Salina St.
Syracuse, NY 13205

or e-mailed to:

The Stand's director,
Ashley Kang, at
Ashley@mysouthsidestand.com

All letters must be no more than 200 words and must contain the writer's full name, address and contact information.

GET YOUR COMMUNITY EVENT PUBLISHED IN THE STAND

The Stand promotes local community events each month here in our print publication and each day online in our Upcoming Events listing. If you have an event you want the community to know about, submit it to The Stand's director by e-mailing a press release, dropping off a flier (Office No. 6 in the South Side Innovation Center, 2610 S. Salina St.) or calling (315) 443-8664 with details.

Be sure to provide the following details to ensure your event is listed:

- Name of your event • Time and date it is taking place • Location with the full address • Who can attend
- Cost • Any special requirements: maybe there is a limit to how many people can attend • Web address
- Short description of the event • Deadlines to register • Contact person — phone number or e-mail

RECENT HOUSING PLAN HISTORY

In 1999, then-U.S. Rep. Jim Walsh became the chairman of a subcommittee that included Housing and Urban Development, and sent more earmarks to Syracuse. From 1999 to around 2008, rounds of funding came to the city for a plan to build and repair housing called the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative.

Each round focused on roughly 15-block areas to revitalize. Approximately 25 different areas were focused on. Two were on the South Side: between South Salina Street and Midland Avenues, and around the cross-section of Cannon and Newell Streets. Paul Driscoll, commissioner of the city's department of neighborhood development, estimated each area received about \$2 million, mostly for exterior renovations.

Five years later, the sheen had begun to wear off: the paint was more faded, the landscape was more grown over.

With Walsh out of Congress, the money is also beginning to fade, and the city has designed a new plan to help with what Driscoll called the "city housing epidemic."

FILLING VACANCIES

Urban Renewal Agency looks for residents to revitalize empty houses



> Khreltz Vest and her husband, Gary, live next to two vacant homes on Pleasant Avenue. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

By | Nate Hopper
Urban Affairs reporter

South Side residents have an opportunity to bid on and renew vacant houses through agency

Sometimes having no neighbors makes for the worst kind of neighbors. That's the case for Khreltz Vest, who lives a couple of blocks east of McKinley-Brighton Elementary School on Pleasant Avenue with her husband, three children and dogs. Both houses next to her home are vacant.

"These two houses are a hazard. They are a draw for all kinds of vermin," Vest said, as she explained that she's seen rats, which have infiltrated the building to the east of her home, scurrying around. The woman two doors east said the rats have overrun her porch before, too. Vest said an elderly lady owns the property but doesn't live there anymore. The woman's children, Vest said, pay the taxes, but don't take care of the place. In their absence rats, squirrels, bats and other wildlife have taken refuge inside.

Kids have snuck into the house to the west of Vest's home to smoke marijuana; she said she could tell from the smell that wafts over. The city owns the property and has told Vest that it will be torn down, but she's been

waiting for a few years now.

The ramshackle vacancies dramatically depreciate the value of her home, which she and her husband have been renovating themselves since they bought it three years ago. She calls the buildings' possible demolition "the dream of tearing them down."

Many South Side residents share the Vests' problem. There are 1,152 vacant houses on the South Side, the most of any Syracuse city neighborhood, according to the 2010 Syracuse Housing Plan. More than one of every five houses is vacant. Paul Driscoll, commissioner of the city's department of neighborhood and business development, called it a "city housing epidemic."

But with federal and state money having mostly dried up, Driscoll said the city will have to try a new strategy for rehabbing blocks of vacant properties, a strategy that could potentially have a lot of upside for South Side residents.

Under a new plan, an agency that's part city and part corporation will be in charge of the properties, with more flexibility to find owners that will care for them. Driscoll said two changes will allow the agency, called the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency, find better matches.

First, the agency, unlike the city, will not have to sell the property to the highest bidder. Instead, it will also

look at the bidder's plan to renovate the property, giving well-intended people who may have less money a chance to buy. This means that qualified South Side residents who couldn't afford the higher prices may still win an auction based on their plan to, for instance, tend and rehab a lawn or build a driveway.

"We can look at each proposal separately and say, 'What does this person wish to do with this property?' We can then more properly unload property that is tax-delinquent or code-violated but the city never had the stomach to take it from the owner," Driscoll said.

The new arrangement will allow the agency to take property back if the new owner doesn't begin to revitalize it within a certain amount of time — something the city couldn't do — to ensure properties improve.

The second big change will be that the agency will use nonprofit neighborhood developers, like Home Headquarters or Jubilee Homes, in a new role: to look at the needs of entire neighborhood blocks, house by house, so they can explain to the city exactly what should be done to rehab the entire area.

"That's what we think these neighborhood groups are best at. Their boards are made up of neighborhood residents, so they should know better than the city what the nuances of a block or area are," Driscoll said. "If five houses need gut rehabs and two need to come down and one needs to be built and we need to subdivide some land into performing property, that's what we want to know. We want to know the whole plan."

This block-level approach will prevent the city from repeating mistakes it has made in the past — in particular, revitalizing individual houses that were next to properties so worn down they greatly reduced the new

buildings' value before anyone even moved in.

"We've built a \$200,000 house that, before the people even moved in, a bank appraisal put at \$50,000 because the housing around it was so dilapidated," Driscoll explained.

Vest said the old system also made the city seem out of touch.

"The city doesn't know what's going on. To them this is just an address on the list," she said.

In order for this new strategy to take place, the Planning Commission, the Common Council and the agency itself must approve it, since the agency already exists but will be performing a new role. Driscoll anticipated all of that being done soon, so the mayor can give the go-ahead to start seizing properties.

This new system, in broad strokes, is the large-scale approach the city will take to redevelop vacant properties and revitalize neighborhoods. There will also be smaller-scale plans, such as the recently announced partnership between the city and the Syracuse Housing Authority to build 50 single-family homes on the South Side as public housing for low-income families.

Driscoll hesitated to estimate how many properties could be seized and renovated yearly under the new plan, but did venture a guess.

"It could be in the hundreds rather than the tens that we are turning over now."

The Vests hope that the run-down properties that have surrounded their home for years will be one of those fixed quickly. Khreltz Vest said that if the "dream of tearing them down" became a reality, she'd like to try to buy both lots on each side of her home: one for a driveway, the other for a yard.

SYRACUSE HOUSING BY THE NUMBERS

HOUSING UNITS

1. Eastwood: 7,305
2. Washington Square: 6,034
- 3. South Side: 5,381**
4. Near West Side: 3,059
5. Court Woodlawn: 2,952

VACANT HOUSING UNITS

- 1. South Side: 1,152**
2. Washington Square: 969
3. Near West Side: 632
4. Southwest: 533
5. Eastwood: 488

VACANCY RATES

1. Park Avenue: 22.8 %
2. Southwest: 22.4 %
3. Prospect Hill: 22.3 %
- 4. South Side: 21.4 %**
5. Near East Side: 20.7 %

Source: 2010 Syracuse Housing Plan



> Filthy debris in one home. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo



> Paint peels off in clumps. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

WHO IS HUNGRY?

Hunger is the physical and mental condition that results from not eating enough food because of insufficient economic, social and community resources. Here is a breakdown of the type of people who struggle with hunger close to home in Central New York.

LOST A JOB IN THE PAST TWO YEARS:

45%

CHILDREN UNDER 18:

37%

RESIDE IN A RURAL OR SUBURBAN AREA:

36%

HAVE NO HEALTH INSURANCE:

14%

HOMELESS:

6%

ELDERLY:

5%

Source: Food Bank of Central New York Hunger Study 2010

A HELPING HAND

Valley Worship Center food pantry is a portrait of hunger in Syracuse



> Volunteers help at the Valley Worship Center, a food pantry that aided 250 people in September. | Brandi Kellam, Staff Photo

By | Brandi Kellam
Urban Affairs reporter

Volunteers, regular visitors at food pantry share their tales of life, struggles and hope

When Brenda Taylor thinks of the starving and the hungry, it's not another country on the other side of the globe that comes to mind. She thinks of herself and her neighbors.

GRANDPARENTS OF SEVEN

"They talk about Third World countries ... but you got people here that are starving to death," Taylor said.

Brenda Taylor has met people on the South Side who are starving, and she and her husband can relate. As she sits in a chair in front of the Valley Worship Center Church of the Nazarene, she recalls her story.

"We were here five days and my husband got seriously injured on his job," Taylor said.

Shortly after, they got news that their grandchildren were in foster care – and found themselves raising not two or three, but seven of them. She said there were times she didn't know where their next meal would come from, but somehow they managed.

"You're constantly worried," Taylor said, "about

how you're gonna feed the kids or if you'll lose the house."

Taylor volunteers at the Valley Worship Center food pantry because it connects her with people who need help putting food on the table.

A COMMUNITY OF THEIR OWN

At the food pantry, people meet each other every month. For some of them, it's their first time at a food pantry – for others, it's a home away from home. Yet, whether it's a first time, occasional, or regular visit, there is something shared when everyone gathers during the fresh food distribution: stories of life, struggles and hope.

The monthly fresh food distribution usually starts at 3:15 p.m. But on this day, by 2:30 p.m., people had already gathered in the church lobby. An older woman spoke about how she was denied help by the government.

"I remember one time I tried to go on disability and they refused me," said Ann Valerino, an 80-year-old with white curly hair and holding a cane. Valerino said she was told she could work sitting down.

According to the Food Bank of Central New York Hunger Study, 5 percent of households that use food pantry services are elderly.

Icelyn Parks, who takes care of her granddaughter,

described the uncertainty of her job as a nurse's aide. "That doesn't help me much, but it's better than nothing." She had only been working a few weeks when she lost her check because the woman she takes care of went into the hospital.

At the food pantry, "80 percent are returns and 20 percent are new each month," said assistant pastor Claire Pietra. She said many families that didn't need help before need it now because of the economy.

And when they gather to take home the fresh cauliflower, apples, bananas, breads and yogurt, they also take home with them the experiences of struggle that they hear from one another.

"What we're seeing is the working poor – although they are doing everything they can do – just don't have enough income," said Tom Slater, who is executive director of the Food Bank of Central New York.

"You're constantly worried about how you're gonna feed the kids."

—Brenda Taylor

PORTRAIT OF HUNGER

In September, the food pantry helped some 71 households including 250 people.

According to the Food Bank of Central New York, 42 percent of households that use its services had to choose between paying for food and paying for rent. In fact, people who skip meals in order to pay for expenses are growing in number because of the economy.

Food Bank Director Tom Slater said the increase in need for food bank services comes from a growing number of people who are making it, but discretionary money is their food money, which means that unexpected expenses could result in a missed meal.

In addition, 45 percent of people using food bank services have lost a job in the past two years.

"Emergency food is not a long-term solution," said Slater, who added that food banks are supposed to be a last resort but many, because of their condition, are using the services on an ongoing basis.

There are at least 11 emergency food pantries on the South Side. Slater says the Food Bank is working with each one to make sure that visitors get what they need.



> A volunteer prepares bread at the center. The center also serves items like fruits and yogurt. | Brandi Kellam, Staff Photo



> Volunteers work together to check the foods before they are distributed. | Brandi Kellam, Staff Photo

WHERE YOU CAN HELP

There are 10 other food pantries on the South Side of Syracuse aside from the Valley Worship Center, located at 2929 Midland Ave.:

Onondaga Valley
Ecumenical Food Pantry

Pilgrim Pantry — Payton
Temple Soup Kitchen

Four Square Gospel
COGIC Food Pantry

Southside Church of
Christ Soup Kitchen

True Vine COGIC Soup
Kitchen

Mount Carmel SDA Pantry

Mount Carmel SDA Soup
Kitchen

Dunbar Center Food
Pantry

Bellgrove Missionary
Baptist Food Pantry

New Jerusalem Ministry
Food Pantry

WILLIAMS' WORDS OF WISDOM

ON BULLYING

Words may hurt, but you can always walk away. If they put their hands on you, then you have every right to defend yourself.

HOW TO DRESS

Boys: It is disrespectful to have pants below the buttocks. Girls: Cover up. Leave more to the imagination. Respect yourself.

ON HOUSE GUESTS

Always offer food or drink.

ON PARENTING

Do not allow kids to bring friends over when parents are not home.

ON HOUSEKEEPING

Never, ever, eat anywhere except in the kitchen or dining room.

ON LIFE

Rule #1: Your granny, mother or wife is always right. If you think she is wrong, refer back to this rule.

MOST IMPORTANT

Show respect, especially to adults.

GRAND(PARENTS)

Local grandparents raising grandchildren part of a national trend



> Clinton Williams Sr. and his wife, Linda, enjoy a family dinner with their three grandchildren. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

By | Jennifer Cheng
Urban Affairs reporter

Grandparents raising their grandchildren promote traditional values to a new generation

Raising teenagers is no easy feat, and to do it twice is impressive. Clinton Williams Sr., 63, and his wife, Linda, 61, are raising their son's three children.

Having raised their own children before, nothing pulls the wool over the Williams' eyes this time around. They are instilling values in their grandchildren that were common in their day, and are now quickly disappearing.

The Williams family is part of a growing national trend of grandparents raising their grandchildren. As of March 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 6.3 percent of children in New York state live in a household run by grandparents. Carrie J. Smith, Syracuse University professor in social work, lists four reasons for absent parents: the large number of people sentenced to prison for drugs, parents in military service, teenage parents who are unable or unwilling to be a parent, and the high rates of mental illnesses.

The three grandchildren — now 16, 17 and 18 years

old — moved in with their grandparents when their mother died in 2001. Linda did not think her grandchildren would get the best upbringing from her son — the children's father, Clinton Jr., 40, who deals with a mental disability. Linda wanted to “keep the children out of [the foster] system.” The children's mother signed away her legal custody of the children to the grandparents while she was in hospice.

At first, Linda found it overwhelming to have three children move in while she was still working full time. She adjusted her work schedule so she could go home any time to check up on them after school. The idea that “Granny could pop up any time” made them more fearful to do anything out-of-line. She soon realized she was no longer the doting granny figure, but had to take on the mother's role as a disciplinarian.

Linda noted with melancholy that the mother's death still has “lasting effects” on her youngest grandchild, Shannarrah. She recounted that she used to find Mother's Day upsetting because, while other classmates were making cards for their mothers, she was making one for her Granny.

Clinton Jr. visits the children once every two weeks. When he is over at the house, he watches television and

chats with them. He recalled it was difficult to give up legal custody of his children to his parents. “I rationalized that I’d still get to see them, so that would be acceptable,” he said. Clinton Jr. does not work and is on disability support. The oldest son, Clinton III, is the closest to their father, who enjoys wrestling with him. The children would often call their father and ask him why he was not over to visit them, Linda said. Their father chips in to buy whatever he can for the children, including their favorite cereal; he occasionally treats them to sports games.

The grandchildren receive a small sum of child support from their father, and the grandparents are also the grantees of a shelter allowance, which is provided to those who are 55 or older and have dependent children under 18. The grandparents also get a bit of help from their daughter, the children’s aunt, who pays for small things like the children’s haircuts.

The U.S. Census Bureau saw a cause for concern in 1999 when it found through studies that “grandparent-maintained families are more likely to be poor than parent-maintained families containing grandparents and grandchildren.” Census 2000 found that 19 percent of families headed by grandparents are below the poverty line.

Linda’s parenting has as much to do with experience as money, though. Nothing gets past her, everyone agrees. Linda knows that when she asks her grandchildren to take the laundry back upstairs that if they say they will do it later, they will most likely not.

“[Granny is] always right,” said Justin, who said there is no way of getting around her years of parenting experience.

“How do you think I got to be 61? Don’t you think I learned some stuff over the years?” said Linda.

The grandparents are not able to do as many chores around the house as when they were younger. Clinton Sr., or “Pop Pop,” asks the grandchildren for little things — for example, to pick up the apples in the yard so he can mow the lawn. The grandchildren help inside the home as well by washing the dishes and vacuuming.

Now that Linda is retired, she can stay home and watch the kids after school.

“Sometimes, their old ways don’t apply anymore,” Shannarrah said. Clinton Sr. forbids Shannarrah from being in the living room when her brothers have their male friends over. She insists there is no need for a boy at this stage of her life, and she should concentrate on getting into college. All three children are not allowed to bring friends upstairs to their bedrooms.

“Shannarrah has been through quite a bit, and I don’t want her getting hurt,” Clinton Sr. said. He worries that with a boyfriend, she could become pregnant like many of her teenage peers. Shannarrah as a result, with her grandparents’ values instilled in her, dresses conservatively. When she is wearing a tank top, she wears a

cardigan, too.

Linda insists on locking the computer with a password. Even when she catches the children minimizing their screens, she asks them to pull the screen back up for inspection.

“They treat me like I’m senile,” Linda complains. The children do tease her, and said it is not uncommon for their granny to assign them to do something, forget she assigned it, and then ask them why they are doing it.

“I know they are good kids because they have an invisible cord holding back from doing things they should not be doing,” said Linda, who added that from what people observe of the grandchildren outside the home, she hears mostly good things.

She did, however, catch wind from a co-worker that Shannarrah was writing alarmingly inappropriate content on her MySpace page. Linda called MySpace to take down the page, and Shannarrah accepted her granny’s judgment.

“I tell them I have eyes all over the city,” Linda joked, referring to relatives and neighbors who keep an eye on her grandchildren to keep them in line. The grandparents’ other grandchildren drop by to visit often, and the children notice that their grandparents spoil them by giving them more money. The grandchildren know they have different values from their peers, but are glad these values have kept them on the right track. The grandparents say that their lives are less dull.

Johanna Hannah, with the Onondaga County Department of Aging and Youth, said that what warms her heart about grandparents raising grandchildren is that she has “never met a grandparent [who] wasn’t dedicated to their kid. There are never ulterior motives. They never want to abuse the system.”



>Shannarrah Williams listens to her grandmother’s wisdom. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

OBTAINING CUSTODY

Johanna Hannah, program assistant of the Caregiver Services at the Onondaga County Department of Aging and Youth, said **obtaining legal custody** of your grandchild(ren) is not difficult, if the parent(s) is willing to give up custody.

However, she said that **parents can be hesitant** to give up custody when they receive a welfare check for their child.

For instance, a family of three children and one parent of the most modest means would be **eligible for roughly \$850**, according to the Onondaga County Department of Social Services.

Without legal custody of the child, grandparents will not qualify for much assistance, said Hannah.

According to Hannah, many grandparents are **not aware of financial aid** made available to senior citizens above 55 who are raising grandchildren.

The Non-Parent Caregiver Grant provides \$400 for one child, and \$125 for each additional child.

According to the American Association of Retired Persons New York, **only 8 percent of people in New York state** who are eligible for the grant receive it.



Community Huddle

> The Kirk Park Colts warm up by running laps around the field before a practice on a Wednesday afternoon. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

By | Kelly Outram
Urban Affairs reporter

The Kirk Park Colts play hard and give the South Side community something to root for

A group of boys outfitted in full football uniforms, none of them an inch taller than 4-feet-10, lines the field at Kirk Park struggling to perform the perfect pushup.

“One, Two.”

The quarterback of the mighty-mights division of the Kirk Park Colts stands before the group, leading the counts. Farther down the field, an assistant coach gives a talk to his teenage players about the importance of maintaining good grades while participating on an athletic team. To everything he says, the players respond with a

loud, firm “Yes, sir.”

“The students primarily learn the concept of being on a team. Football is a team sport,” said Mark Hall, president of the Kirk Park Colts. “Discipline comes along with being on time, having your equipment ready. Football teaches good concepts and how to set goals.”

The Kirk Park Colts, a Pop Warner youth football team representing the South Side of Syracuse, is one of 19 participants in the Central New York division. The team has six different squads for boys between the ages of 5 and 15, as well as a cheerleading squad. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday the 180 football players and 70 cheerleaders practice in Kirk Park under the watchful eye of passionate community volunteers.

This community was threatened on Sept. 11, the Colts’ first game of this season against the Sherman

Park Bulldogs. Gunshots from the nearby woods interrupted the game, forcing it to be canceled at halftime and shaking the community. Nobody was hurt; a 15-year-old admitted to taking part in the incident. The Pop Warner Commission responded by deciding to move games based on a week-by-week judgment. On Saturday, Oct. 2, the commission moved the Colts' games back home. Similar acts of violence during games have occurred before, including both shootings and stabbings.

It's easy to judge the situation from the outside, but the latest incident was isolated and had nothing to do with the teams that were playing on the field, said Tiffany Rush, a volunteer who has been involved with the Colts for four years.

"You must come in and read the book. You can't judge it from the outside," she said.

Hall said that in the past 19 years he has served as president, 12 former Colts players received Division I athletic scholarships, and one player, Jo-Lonn Dunbar, went on to become a linebacker for the New Orleans Saints, who won the 2010 Super Bowl championship.

Joining the team costs anywhere from \$100 to \$200, and coming up with the money can sometimes be a challenge for the families.

"Most of the players come from single-mother homes," Hall said. There are raffles to raise money, and scholarships are available for students who want to join the team but can't afford it.

Hall, who played for the Colts as a child, recalled



> Mark Hall, president of the Kirk Park Colts, stresses teamwork and discipline. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

that the team folded in the mid-1970s because of a lack of support and money, leaving a noticeable void. "There had been an organization with a rich tradition that no longer existed," Hall said.

In 1991, Hall and his wife, a former Colts cheerleader, decided to bring the teams back to the community. The first year back there were 175 football players and cheerleaders, and the second year that number increased to 350. The Colt cheerleaders are the only CNY squad to make it to nationals five times in a row, placing twice in the early 2000s, Hall said. In 2005, the junior PeeWee team won the state championship.

Hall said one of the biggest challenges that comes with the team's success on the field is funding.

"It's always money," Hall said. "We have teams that are good, and as a result they can choose if they want to participate in other opportunities that require traveling – and that can take money."

To help, students sell candy and host their own fundraisers. Some parents also donate money to the team.

Initially, Hall said he wanted to use the Colts program as an incentive for kids to come out and play while emphasizing education. For the first eight years, after-school tutoring was mandatory, but limited resources made that requirement difficult and it was dropped.

Volunteers keep the Colts together.

"(The students) definitely learn teamwork, responsibility, dependency, loyalty," Rush said. Since most of the schools in the Syracuse City School District don't offer cheerleading as an activity until high school, cheerleading for the Colts gives the girls a jump.

Rush said for her, the biggest challenges sometimes come with other parents who frequently work and cannot support the team the way they would like.

"We just try to be responsible for one another," she said.

Shaquoya Howard has been volunteering with the Colts for the past 11 years. She said she wants to make sure that the kids on the field today are getting the same love and affection that her own kids did. Howard describes her volunteer role as ever-changing.

"The grocery shopper, the mother, the father, the big sister, I'm whatever they need. It's a calling for me," Howard said looking out at the children practicing on the field. "I have one biological child out there, but really, they're all my kids."

Rush and Howard often see girls from the community come to watch football practices. When she sees them she asks the girls why they don't do something positive and become a Colts cheerleader, Howard said. It teaches girls to value themselves, she said.

"The community would be in trouble (if the Colts were not around)," Howard said. "There would be kids at every corner store, kids would be getting involved with drugs . . . The Colts are a great program and I don't ever want to see it end."

NOTABLE COLTS

Jo-Lon Dunbar

Linebacker
Boston College
New Orleans Saints

Terry Butler

Running back
Villanova University
New York Jets

Marquis Kirkland

Tight end
Villanova University

Bruce Williams

Wide receiver
Syracuse University

KIRK PARK INCIDENT TIMELINE

9/11/10: Shots are fired in the woods near the opening football game at Kirk Park against the Sherman Park Bulldogs. The game is suspended at halftime.

9/12/10: A 15-year-old is arrested in connection with the shooting. Police say they are looking for another suspect.

9/23/10: The Colts resume their game that was cut short against the Bulldogs, playing at Mattydale. The Pop Warner board decides to determine the location of the Colts' games on a week-by-week basis.

10/2/10: Pop Warner Commission decides that Kirk Park can host its home games again with additional safety measures.

Source:

<http://www.9wsyr.com>

SERMONS AS PLAYS

Atonement Lutheran Church takes an alternative approach to God

By | Emily Warne
Urban Affairs reporter

What happens in the basement of Atonement Lutheran Church is not conventional worship

At various times, you can find women huddled in masses, sobbing, or men breaking out into complicated tap dancing. There are musical instruments and feathered boas strewn about the closets. But this isn't some bizarre ritual — the congregation of this South Side church is spreading the word of God through the stage, rather than the pulpit.

Appleseed Productions has been run by the Atonement Parish since 1993, when a group of parishioners decided that they should use their creativity — and solid volunteer force — to bring ethical and entertaining plays to the community.

Now, 140 plays later, they've performed everything from "Macbeth" to "Children of a Lesser God." Most of the shows have one theme in common: a lesson in morality that is meant to teach the audience some sort of positive message.

The Rev. Nelson Gaetz has seen the ups and downs of this community-based theater, and has tried to play an active role in engaging his congregation in the running of it.

"Showing the evolution of Martin Luther from a regular cleric to the founder of one of the most scandalous and contentious religious splits in the history of the Catholic and Protestant religions is very important," Gaetz said. "This isn't just about Martin Luther, this is about the internal struggles everyone faces."

And while Luther may seem like an overtly religious and obvious topic for a church to tackle, striking the balance between how to preach without preaching is something with which the church struggles.

"People get their sermon from me on Sundays," Gaetz said, laughing. "They don't want or need a double dose of it on a Friday or Saturday night. But that doesn't mean we can't have a message in our storytelling and entertaining."

To bring a "night-out" feel to the performance, the group also provides desserts and coffee during the intermission so that the audience can mingle and even get the opportunity to chat with other volunteers who aren't quickly changing or preparing for the next act.

"We do this because it's fun," said Meghan Pearson, a director of Appleseed's September production of "Parade."

"It's a way for us to get close to our neighbors and

community members while still following our passion."

However, there are limitations to those performances. As it is run almost solely by volunteers, it's often difficult to keep people heavily involved or invested performance after performance, season after season. There are dedicated groups, but there's also a lot of turnover.

While some shows have been more successful than others, the group still finds enjoyment in every show.

"There's nothing like a standing ovation," Pearson said. "Especially when it's coming from your friends and neighbors."



> The Atonement Lutheran Church, 116 W. Glen Ave., becomes a religious playhouse on Friday and Saturday nights. | Emily Warne, Staff Photo

TICKETS

• For Plays

- \$18 for adults
- \$15 for seniors and students

• For Musicals

- \$20 for adults
- \$17 for seniors and students

Tickets for Appleseed Productions performances can be purchased by visiting the website at appleseedproductions.org

ACTING FOR GOD

Bell Grove dance troupe puts on a play to fight street influence



> Anna-Rachel Richardson, left, and Brianna Kent are two of seven members of Media Unit. | Danielle Waugh, Staff Photo

By | Danielle Waugh
Urban Affairs reporter

The Echoes of Joy dance team will perform youth-oriented “Hoods Heading to Heaven”

You’ll eventually find your way back home. This is 40-year-old Nicole Hudson’s message to young people on the streets.

It’s a lesson she says she had to learn the hard way. She grew up in a religious family. But around age 20, she began straying from church life to street life.

“A lot of people was praying for me,” Hudson said.

As she sits in a pew in the Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church, she wears her message on her sleeve — literally. Her lime green T-shirt reads, “God’s Chosen Vessels.”

Hudson, along with her fellow dance team members, is trying to get others to come back home — back to the church.

The Bell Grove dance team, called Echoes of Joy, is rehearsing for a different kind of show. The church usually incorporates dance routines and spiritual songs into its services, but the seven women are trying their hand at acting. In a show they have written called “Hoods Head-

ing to Heaven,” the Echoes of Joy will act out a scenario they see too often: youth growing up in the church only to leave for the streets.

“They’re looking for love and everything else in the wrong places ... when it’s all in church,” said Ashley Noel, 22.

It’s an issue that hits close to home for several of the dancers. Jessica Anderson, 24, said her cousin is one of the many youth leaving the church for the streets.

“He’s going through some stuff. But I’m still praying for him to come back,” Anderson said.

Though they could not determine a specific number or percentage, the dancers agreed: youth leaving church for the streets happens “often.” There are signs of this trend in other statistics. Half of the students at Corcoran High School aren’t graduating.

After the Echoes of Joy decided upon a play, Noel had a chance encounter with the director of a local teen-focused performance group: the Media Unit’s Walt Shepperd.

It happened over breakfast. Noel spotted Shepperd from across a restaurant and recognized him as the man behind the Media Unit’s years of theater and television

Continued on Page 14

WHAT IS MEDIA UNIT?

Founded in 1973, the Media Unit is a theater and television production group for Central New York teenagers. The group of seven creates, performs and produces shows that appear on PACB-TV Channel 98.

The group also gives live shows in venues ranging from the Civic Center to the Onondaga County Justice Center. Tackling teen issues, past shows have been about gang violence, underage drinking, and teen pregnancy.

The Media Unit is currently recruiting new members for the cast and crew.

SHOWTIME

- “Hoods Heading to Heaven”
- 7:30 p.m. Dec. 3
- Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church
- Tickets: \$5
- How to get tickets: Call the church at (315) 476-7391

Continued from Page 13

productions. She thought he could help the Echoes write their script.

“So I put my pride aside and said, ‘I’m going to ask him,’” Noel said. “And (Shepperd) said he would come in to help us write it and make it a success.”

But that didn’t mean Shepperd’s services came without a price. “I told them right upfront and said, ‘We’re going to try and snatch some of your folks,’” Shepperd said, laughing.

He’s hoping the show will recruit new cast and crew from the South Side. But first, he must turn this group of dancers into triple-threats — actors, dancers and singers.

“They’re looking for love and everything else in the wrong places.”

—Ashley Noel

After 34 years, Shepperd has perfected his directing method. He asks cast members to keep diaries to get into character. He allows them to improvise to develop dialogue, and lets the cast script the show themselves. When the script is done, the singing and dancing come next.

“It’s a very organic process,” Shepperd said.

For this show, he’s bringing in talent from the Media Unit to serve as coaches. Seventeen-year-old Brianna Kent is one of those coaches. After growing up on the South Side, Kent is looking forward to producing a show with an empowering message for youth in high-crime neighborhoods.

“(The play) will be a really strong message because when people hear about hoods, they just think violence, violence, violence,” Kent said. “But some people can really change, and switch their ways and go to the right way.”

The Echoes of Joy will be practicing with the Media Unit once a week to prepare for the Dec. 3 show. Proceeds will be divided between the Bell Grove church and the dance team’s 2012 Disney World trip.

“In addition to being a fundraiser, I think it’s really going to help us, too,” Noel said. “I feel like this is going to be our time to really get tested by our advisors and by God to see how dedicated we really are.”



> Members of the dance team, which will perform “Hoods Heading to Heaven” on Dec. 3. | Danielle Waugh, Staff Photo



> Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church is located at 219 W. Castle St. in Syracuse. | Danielle Waugh, Staff Photo



> A crew member for Media Unit, which was founded in 1973, prepares her equipment. | Danielle Waugh, Staff Photo

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BAG YOUR BOTTLES

A one-man recycling operation picks up recyclables from residents

By | Sierra Jiminez
Urban Affairs reporter

Going door to door in the South Side, Tyrone Cannon created his own business

A year ago, Tyrone Cannon sat in his living room joking around with friends, drinking a few beers. “Save your bottles,” he told them. “One of these days I’m going to start a bottle return business.”

Today, he runs Cannon Street Recycling, a door-to-door pickup service for can and bottle returns.

It started with neighbors who would bring bags of cans and bottles to his door in exchange for the 5-cent deposit on returns. Then, Cannon turned his childhood home next door into his “office.” The gutted-out house now serves as a bottle return station and sorting center for his new business.

“That used to be my grandmother’s room,” Cannon said, laughing as he gestured toward a room filled with bottle-filled bags.

In New York state, individuals get 5 cents per can or bottle for their returns. Businesses such as Cannon’s get that back, plus a 3½-cent handling fee.

Cannon has collected enough cans and bottles to cover the floors of four rooms in his sorting center. On an average sorting day, when distributors come to his house for pickup, Cannon can fill one room alone with more than 900 empty glass beer bottles, stacked ceiling high in cardboard boxes.

Each bottle and can is sorted by brand and color. After he sorts everything into piles in the main room, Cannon stuffs everything into oversized white trash bags. He said he easily goes through 300 bags each week.

“There’s no end to sorting, really,” Cannon said. “I would have to shut down completely for about a week or two to really get everything down to nothing.”

For now, Cannon’s business is mainly on the South Side. He has around 30 houses he calls on in the neighborhood and two senior citizen homes in Syracuse. He said he hopes to expand his business in the next few months, beginning with pickups in the Nob Hill area and more senior citizen homes.

He advertises his business using word-of-mouth, depending on his customers to tell their friends and neighbors.

“We like it,” said Janet Bacon, a resident of the Toomey Abbott Towers complex for 10 years. “It’s very convenient.”

Bacon, who doesn’t have a car, typically takes the bus to Wegmans. In the past, she’s tried to combine her bottle



> Tyrone Cannon’s bottle return business fills all four rooms of his sorting center. | Sierra Jiminez, Staff Photo

return trips with her shopping trips, but she said it’s been a hassle.

“A lot of times Centro won’t let you take a lot of cans on the bus,” she said. “And the [Toomey Abbott Market] doesn’t take them unless you buy their brand.”

“Basically that’s what it is,” Cannon said. “It just cuts out all the inconvenience. It keeps them from having to stand in line and return all the bottles and then go do their shopping.”

Cannon said on a typical pickup day, he gets returns from 10 to 15 people just at Toomey Abbott.

Although he’s always on call, Wednesday and Friday are Cannon’s pickup days. The rest of the week he leaves for sorting.

He tracks every can in his head. When he goes out on pickups, Cannon fills his large white moving truck with trash cans and bags for sorting. After making a count, Cannon takes a wad of \$1 bills out of his front pocket and pays out the normal 5-cent return for each can or bottle.

On average, he said he gives \$100 worth of bottle returns to his customers each time he goes out on one of his runs.

“It’s more convenient,” said Rasta Muhammad, a resident at Toomey Abbott Towers. Muhammad uses Cannon Street Recycling once every few weeks. A diabetic, he said he goes through 14 to 16 gallons of water each month. This time around, Muhammad returned more than 200 plastic water bottles and soda cans.

“I never went around to other bottle returns to see how they did it or nothing,” Cannon said. “I just did it.”

BOTTLES AS A BUSINESS

New York state offers 5 cents for every bottle you recycle.

Businesses such as Cannon Street Recycling make 3½ cents for every bottle they return to the bottler.

Cannon picks up bottles from his customers three times a week. The rest of his time is spent sorting the hundreds of bottles he collects each week.

For individuals who take public transportation, returning a large amount of bottles is difficult or even impossible.

RECYCLING FACTS

The resin from plastic bottles, polyethylene terephthalate, also known as PET, can be used to make fabrics, carpets and new bottles.

Americans bought more than 4 billion gallons of water in individual-portion bottles in 2006.

Nearly 2.5 billion bottles of water a year are sold in New York alone — stacked up end to end, they’d reach the moon.

Sources:

<http://www.npr.org>

<http://www.dec.ny.gov>

BUSINESS MODEL

Irvin Hanslip has never let other Jamaican restaurants dictate the dishes and flavors he offers.

ON COMPETITION

"I don't deal with competition. For small business, competition is a myth," Hanslip said. "If anything, we should pool our resources and help one another. When you compete, you want to win. You want to win by any means necessary. ... The strength and the energy that I would put into worrying about what (they) are cooking, I put that energy into what I am doing."

HANSLIP'S JERK HUT

In tough economic times, his restaurant manages to survive



> Jerk Hut owner Irvin Hanslip has greeted and served customers for 14 years. | Fernando Alfonso III, Staff Photo

By | Fernando Alfonso III
Urban Affairs reporter

Irvin "Bongo" Hanslip helps support his family with his Jamaican cuisine restaurant

Growing up in Kingston, Jamaica, Irvin "Bongo" Hanslip learned the value of hard work from his parents.

"My parents were only rich in culture, poor in finance," said Hanslip, 63, whose parents were both farmers. "By seeing how they provided for us, so we could have a better education, it give us the knowledge and the experience to provide for ourselves and our children."

For the past 14 years, Hanslip has provided for his family with the Jerk Hut, a Jamaican cuisine restaurant at 440 South Ave.

The recent economic downturn has hurt small businesses in Syracuse like the Jerk Hut, said Ben Walsh, deputy commissioner of Syracuse's Neighborhood and Business Development Department.

"Anecdotally, we've seen what the rest of the country has seen. That the economy has not been good for a couple of years now," Walsh said. "We do feel the impact

of that. So when you look at some of the neighborhood business districts in some of the more economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city ... that effect is compounded."

According to Census data gathered in 2000, 21.7 percent of families in Syracuse lived below the poverty level. A survey conducted by the Census Bureau between 2006 and 2008 found the number rose to 24.3 percent.

"With lots of people without jobs, especially in the downtown area, you can see the drop in support," said Hanslip, who said he saw a 30 percent decrease in business. "People come and people go. Sometimes you wonder if it's the economy but you can't let those things bug you. You have to just move on. ... You can't raise your price, you have to just absorb the crisis."

The price of cooking oil, food and electricity for the restaurant, one of his biggest monthly expenses, increased dramatically, Hanslip said.

"I wish there was another company other than National Grid. When I started, I was paying like, \$200 or \$500 a month," said Hanslip, who now pays \$1,000-\$1,300 a month or more in the winter. "Sometimes every month ... our expense sometimes exceed our income. But we have to struggle with it."

Hanslip has also struggled to find a new and affordable refrigerator and deep fryer, which are in need of replacing.

“When I started in 1996, the same deep fryer used to be \$600. Now it’s \$1,000,” Hanslip said.

When the cost of the refrigerator is added on top of the deep fryer, it will cost \$3,000-\$4,000, he said.

Through it all, Hanslip stays positive by remembering where he came from.

When he was 7 years old, Hanslip’s mother taught him how to cook. One of the first dishes he made was jerk chicken.

“The first thing your mom taught you was how to clean your room, clean yourself and cook,” Hanslip said. “Those are the main necessities that your parents can give you, is how to take care of yourself. Then you have to put that to practice.”

In 1970, Hanslip moved to the United States, and he worked at the Allied Chemical factory in Solvay for about 14 years. When the factory closed in 1986, Hanslip opened Island Furniture on South Salina Street, across from Dunk & Bright.

Some of Hanslip’s regular customers were Syracuse University college students looking for desks and beds, he said.

“A lot of parents used to call me from New Rochelle, New York City, all over, to make sure that their kids get furniture,” he said.

During the 1980s, Hanslip cooked for SU’s Caribbean Students Association. It became his inspiration to open the restaurant.

“They (students) used to say, ‘Why don’t you open a restaurant? Bongo, why don’t you open a restaurant?’ ” he said.

Hanslip opened the restaurant in 1996. One of his first customers was Kwasi Owusu-Anane, owner of Timbaktu Imports next door to the restaurant.

“I’ll go for maybe jerk chicken ... in the evening, sometimes jerk fish,” said Owusu-Anane, who hopes more local restaurants will open in the community. “Look around here. Where’s the restaurants? There’s no restaurants in this neighborhood. He’s the only one, actually.”

Owusu-Anane is not the only person who would like to see more businesses on the South Side. So would Ben Sio, director of Sustainable Infrastructure and Policy Development for CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity.

“The fact that the Jerk Hut has been able to stay open for all these years and stay successful is a testament to how important it is to the community on the South Side. I’d love to see more businesses like that on the South Side,” Sio said. “Small business, especially in Central New York ... those are the fabric of our economy right now. You can actually see all the jobs being added nationwide are primarily in small businesses that are growing.”

CenterState is a nonprofit organization serving 12 counties in New York and helps businesses “achieve economic growth and prosperity through partnerships, planning, and problem-solving,” according to the organization’s website.



> The Jerk Hut restaurant is a South Side staple for authentic Jamaican food. | Fernando Alfonso III, Staff Photo

A SPICY SEASONING

How to make jerk seasoning (From Dunstan A. Harris’ “Island Cooking: Recipes From the Caribbean”):

- 2 ounces of crushed Jamaican pimento
- 1/4 teaspoon of freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon of ground cinnamon
- 12 scallions, cleaned and chopped
- 6 Scotch Bonnet or 12 jalapeno peppers, halved with seeds
- 1/3 cup of red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon of salt
- 1 teaspoon of freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons of soy sauce
- Hot pepper sauce (optional)

Combine all ingredients in a blender or food processor. Add hot pepper sauce to taste. Process to liquefy for 1 minute. Pour into a jar and refrigerate. Makes 1 cup.

DIVIDED HOMES

An estimated 32 percent of American children come from single-parent homes, according to the Kids Count Data Center.

Consider the statistics below, expressed as a percentage of American children living in single-parent homes. The figures are separated by race.

BLACK, AFRICAN AMERICAN:

65%

AMERICAN INDIAN:

50%

HISPANIC, LATINO:

38%

NON-HISPANIC, WHITE:

23%

ASIAN, PACIFIC ISLANDER:

16%

ABOUT THIS STORY

Reporting of this story was inspired by the experiences of Urban Affairs reporter Jamese McConico.

Facing troubles at home, McConico turned to her teacher for safety, security and inspiration.

Turn to Page 20 for a firsthand account of McConico's experiences.

TEACHER, MOTHER AND PROTECTOR

Linda Dunn's classroom is a home away from home for her students



> Linda Dunn stands outside her classroom at Danforth Magnet Middle School. | Mackenzie Reiss, Staff Photo

By | Jamese McConico
Urban Affairs reporter

Linda Dunn makes teaching her life’s work, creating lasting impressions along the way

Danforth Magnet Middle School feels like home to social studies teacher Linda Dunn. Indeed, it is.

She not only teaches here now, but she also walked these very halls as an elementary student some 40 years ago. Dunn has had a classroom on every floor of the school and just recently settled into her first-floor “home” for this year.

It is a room filled with everything from world maps and a poster of President Barack Obama to word walls and classroom rules. As students work, she patrols, checking to make sure they’re on task and understanding the lesson. Lively and colorful while teaching, Dunn is calm and serene when she works one-on-one with students who need extra help.

Dunn is more than just an eighth-grade social studies and world geography teacher. As a teacher’s assistant

and teacher for the past 20 years, she has been many things: a mentor, a role model, an authority figure, and like so many other teachers who go unrecognized — a mother figure.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the majority of teachers are women — they make up 84 percent of public school teachers and 87 percent in private schools.

Findings by the Kids Count Data Center show 32 percent of American children come from single-parent homes. The child usually lives with the mother. As economic pressure continues to rise, more mothers work longer hours and spend less time at home. According to the Women Employed Institute, 45 percent of working mothers are putting in longer hours now. And as more mothers work longer hours, more teachers like Dunn fill in.

“Some of our students come to school to eat breakfast because they didn’t get it at home,” Dunn said.

Dunn contributes to the community, too, as a church trustee and the congregation’s financial secretary. She has it all in order, but things were not always so great.

Dunn's mother and father had a tumultuous relationship, and her father was shot and killed when she was 9. But it was when her stepfather joined the family that life became a downward spiral. "He was abusive. Back when I was in school, kids came home for lunch. One day we all went home and my mother was nowhere to be found. There was a broken towel rack on the floor. When we finally did see her later on that night, her face was swollen and you could tell they had been fighting."

The constant abuse of her mother finally took its toll. "I left home when I was 16 and went to live with my (grandmother)." Eventually the rest of Dunn's siblings moved in as well. "Since I was the oldest, I had to basically raise my sisters and brothers."

Dunn still recalls a former teacher who made a difference for her then.

"I was going through so much when I went to school. I was stubborn and didn't want to be bothered, but there was one teacher who just wouldn't leave me alone. My history teacher, Mrs. Geridean, pushed and pushed and wouldn't let me do whatever I wanted to do."

Dunn did not go straight to college, though.

Her sister died of leukemia and left three children behind. Having no children of her own, Dunn took on the task of raising her then 2-year-old niece, Shania Golden. Now 24, Shania calls her "Mom."

Entering the classroom recently, Shania rattles on about the rainy weather. Dunn chuckles and says of Shania, "I created that. She's as spoiled as can be."

Shania, asked about the influence Dunn has had in her life, thinks for a moment. "My mother has taught me how to be a woman," she says.

Currently a teacher's assistant at Bellevue Elementary School, Shania hopes to soon be a teacher just like

her mom. "She's been a teacher my whole life, and since I was little that's all I've wanted to be. She inspired me."

Dunn says every year there is that special child she embraces and takes under her wing. "There is a little girl in one of my classes who needs clothes. I'm going to make Shania go through all her old clothes so I can give them to her," Dunn says. With school having started only six weeks ago, the teacher-student relationship is still being developed, but Dunn knows the day will come when a student will need more than teaching.

Each day she comes to work, Dunn is prepared to be someone's mother, confidant and protector.

"I don't ever let anyone hurt my babies. If they fight, I don't mind jumping in the middle to break it up. If they're hungry, I have a pantry here at school stocked full of different snacks and treats. If they need clothes or shoes, I provide them.

"I wear several hats. I do home visits — that's right, I show up at their houses unannounced. I make phone calls, and I work on the weekend. I'm not always well-received. There was a time when a child was not doing very well in my class. I tried to call his parents several times, and when I couldn't reach anyone I went to his house. You would think his mother would have been happy that I was concerned about him, but instead, she acted like I was bothering her," Dunn recalls.

Inclusion teacher Karen Broughton speaks highly of Dunn. "She is a great teacher. She doesn't let them get away with anything. She holds them accountable."

Broughton recalls going over the definition of no-nonsense with a group of students. She asked, "Which teachers do you know that are no-nonsense teachers?" They all said Dunn. "She's a no-nonsense teacher, but she's the kind of teacher who cares as well. Students know she cares about them," Broughton says.

Seventh-grade Vice Principal Kenneth Baxter fit in praise of Dunn as he patrolled the halls recently. "Pull your pants up boy!" he shouted out to one, and admonished another, "Lay off the girls man. Leave them alone. They're all complaining about you."

Dunn, he said, holds the students "accountable."

"I wish I had 25 of Ms. Dunn. She's a great role model who's been around a long time, and she's one of the best we have."

Dunn worked at a bank for 19 years before she got here. She wasn't happy, and the seeds that sixth-grade history teacher Ms. Geridean planted when Dunn was in elementary school started to bloom. Dunn was determined to get her bachelor's degree in history. In 1990, she enrolled in college in Oswego and went to school part time for nine years. She was determined to walk across that stage. In 1999, she did.

"Perseverance is key. I never gave up. Whether you're a teacher or student, people need to persevere. In order to stay in the race you have to have faith in yourself."

MS. DUNN'S MEMORIES

BIGGEST CHALLENGE

"Children find it so hard to trust adults. I have to break through those walls and build trust with them on an individual basis."

MOST REWARDING MOMENT

"Whenever I'm out and about and a former student walks up to me, tells me how well they're doing and remembers my name. There's just something about a student who remembers your name."

MOST MEMORABLE STUDENT

"I never taught her, but there was this one student. Her name was Nadia Jackson. Nadia didn't care about anything. She couldn't stand school, but one day I was out with a girlfriend and I saw her. She had gotten an athletic scholarship to college and loved school."



> Linda Dunn helps a student with homework during classroom exercises. | Jamese McConico, Staff Photo

ONE LIFE SAVED

Student turned to her teacher after witnessing mother's murder

By | Jamese McConico
Urban Affairs reporter

When Jamese McConico wanted to write a story about a teacher more than anything, an editor asked why. This is her answer.

My father murdered my mother in front of me when I was 10 years old. I remember it like yesterday. My mother lay dying, my father demanding she get up, and I stood crying hysterically. My father told my brother to take me back down the hill to his mother, my grandmother's house. I didn't know it, but that would be the last time I'd see my mother alive. As I write this, I miss her and my heart greatly cries out for her.

Ten years old and left alone, that's how I felt. My granny is my mother's mother; she adores me and is the love of my life, the reason I am, the reason I do all that I do, and the one person who loves me despite of and not because of. Her love is the epitome of unconditional love.

My grandma is my father's mother. She hated me, but it was the court system that decided I must live with her until I was 18. Eight years of emotional and mental torture. I felt like I had nowhere to go and wished every day that I was never born or that God would take me away. Once a lively little girl with flopping pigtails who loved her Miss Piggy doll, I now hated life.

I immersed myself in books not because I loved to read, but because it was an escape — temporary peace of mind. It was when I was an 11th-grade student at Phillips High School that I met my theater teacher, Ms. Alicia Johnson. She changed my life forever.

She was short in stature — only 4-foot-11 — but she had the presence of a 7-footer and she meant business. It is because of Ms. Johnson that I was bitten by the acting bug. When I was on stage, I didn't have to be Jamese anymore. I could be any character who could go anyplace in the world. There were days when I didn't even have rehearsal that I would beg Ms. Johnson to let me stay after school. One day I remember her saying, "I've never seen a child not want to go home as much as you." But that's because she didn't know that house she called home was more like hell for me.

There was always screaming and fighting. In eight years there was never a time that I truly felt loved. I was the last to know, but the day my father finally told me my mother had passed, I walked back into my grandma's house and all she said was, "Is you all right?" "Yes ma'am," I replied, and that was all. No one hugged me. No one told me everything was going to be OK, because

no one cared about me, and besides my granny, the only other person who did care was now dead. When she died, a part of me was lowered into that grave with her. I was never the same.

It was my theater teacher, Ms. Johnson, who saved me from that life, and at nearly 27 years old today, I still feel her by my side.

When I became a seventh- to 12th-grade theater teacher at Erwin High School, I remembered the compassion and kindness she showed me. My past is what made me determined to do for others what was done for me.

It was a poor demographic, and the kids were hurting. Every single day for two years I had to encourage someone's child, give a hug or say I love you. When my cheerleaders needed clothing and school supplies, I provided. When a graduating senior needed money to pay for night school, I gave. When a child was being abused by her stepfather, I stepped in. I didn't do those things for accolades or praise; I did them because I was once each of those children in one way or another.

My grandma used to tell me I wouldn't be anything, that I would grow up to have five or six babies and live in the projects strung out on drugs. No one expected me to make it, but I did. Partly for me, partly to say I told you so, but mostly because it's what God ordained.

When I left Birmingham, Ala., to come to Syracuse, my students were no longer students, they had become my children. The last day I saw them, we cried for what seemed like hours, but the one message I left with each of them was this, "If nobody has told you they love you today, know that Ms. McConico does, and no matter how far I am, I'm only a phone call away or an airplane away." I meant what I said then, and I still mean it today.

At the time, Ms. Johnson wasn't a mother, but she stepped into that role for me. It was because of her love that I knew it was my destiny to love others as I had been loved.

Food for thought: Teachers make all other professions possible.



ABOUT THIS STORY

This story is a firsthand account, written by Urban Affairs reporter Jamese McConico, about how one teacher helped change her life.

Facing troubles at home, McConico turned to her teacher for safety, security and inspiration.

Her experiences inspired her story on Page 18 about Linda Dunn, a teacher at Danforth Magnet Middle School.