"Saving Our Sons: Reflections of My Journey"

By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

In the book, *The Other Wes Moore, One Name, Two Fates,* best-selling author Wes Moore recounts the story of the dramatic turn in life taken by two boys who have the same name and who both grow up in Baltimore, Maryland. One boy becomes a Rhodes scholar, a best-selling author, and a business leader, and the other serves a life sentence in prison. Wes Moore, a politician, investment banker, author, and television producer is now the Governor of Maryland and the first Black governor of the state.

The story of *The Other Wes Moore, One Name, Two Fates* represents the paradox of raising young Black men in America. In Wes Moore's story, one sees challenges that cut across economic and class lines and the factors, both tangible and intangible, which determine one's success. As a middle-class parent of two successful Black men and the grandparent of a 26-year-old man, a 10-year-old adolescent male, and a two-year-old male toddler, I have faced these challenges and continue to be troubled by the dilemmas facing our young Black men. What can we/I do to stop the killing of our sons?

These challenges resonated for me after viewing the film, *The Torture of Mothers* (1980), directed and produced by award-winning stage and screen director, and founder of the New Federal Theater, Woodie King Jr. The film, docudrama based on the "Harlem Six," is told from the perspective of Black mothers. It was created in response to James Baldwin's essay A Report from Occupied Territory | The Nation, July 11, 1966, and Truman Nelson's investigative book, *The Torture of Mothers* (Beacon, 1968). The "Harlem Six" were six Black men abused by

the police and convicted of murdering a storeowner despite the lack of substantive evidence that they had committed the crime. All but one of the "Harlem Six" were eventually exonerated. The film also reminded me of the public media trial that ensued in 1989 when five Black and Latino teens, the "Central Park Five," were arrested and convicted of beating and raping a white woman in Central Park. These teens served sentences that ranged from six to 13 years; in 2002, the charges against them were vacated as a result of new DNA evidence and a confession from the rapist. Donald Trump's posting of a full-page ad in the *New York Times* in 1989 advocating that these youth receive the death penalty further exacerbated the situation.

The "Harlem Six" and the "Central Park Five" are chilling reality checks on what Black mothers face, fear, and encounter while raising their sons in a society that stereotypes and criminalizes Black men at a rate that is proportionately higher than the rate by which White men are criminalized. There are far too many Black males who are victims of police brutality and institutionalized racism. As mothers, we have to be deliberate, intentional, and vigilant in how we raise our sons.

My two sons, Talib Kweli Greene and Jamal K. Greene have embarked on very different journeys that represent their passion. Talib Kweli is an internationally known hip-hop artist, activist, business entrepreneur, and writer, and Jamal is a professor of Constitutional Law at Columbia University. He is currently serving as Deputy Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Legal Counsel. They are successful men who grew up in a household that embodied a worldview that emphasized the importance of finding one's passion and enhancing their creative and imaginative life. Their father and I surrounded them with a rich environment

embodied by literature, music, art, and culture. Haki Madhubuti's poem on " Art" underscored what we were conscious of doing. He tells us:

Art is fundamental instruction and food for a people's soul. . .

Magnify your children's mind with art. . .

Jumpstart their questions with art

Introduce your children to the cultures of the world through art. . .

Keep them curious, political and creative through art . . .

"Art" *Taught By Women* (Third World Press, 2020)

We made conscious decisions to ensure that our sons had the self-confidence and self-esteem to excel intellectually, to engage in discriminative acts, and to critically examine their environment. This was no easy task as we were professional parents who had very demanding schedules.

It Takes a Village

It takes a village to raise our Black sons, and the village comes in many forms: grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, personal friends, teachers, neighbors, ministers, sports coaches, and professional colleagues. We are interdependent and when we are not in an environment supported by our immediate families and friends, we have to create other supportive networks that involve our extended relationships. The importance of this was affirmed by my husband and me in the raising of our sons. Our gatherings of the extended family on special occasions and with friends and professional colleagues reinforced the village.

While the parents are the first nurturers and educators in a family, the second is often the school environment and the teacher. We deliberately chose an African-centered early educational environment as the first school for our sons. The early school encounters of both my husband and I had left scars. I had gone to a predominantly white Catholic school and faced racial discrimination, and my husband had gone to a public school. Because he was a child actor, had felt continually marginalized from the other children. He was often absent, and the school considered him a truant, thus further marginalizing him. No one attempted to recognize his special circumstance as a child actor.

We strongly believed that our sons should be surrounded by role models who affirmed their identity and who instilled self-confidence and with an educational environment that emphasized knowledge of self and culture. Thus, their first school was Weusi Shule, an African-centered school in Brooklyn, and their second was Junior Academy, a private educational school for Black children. Our sons felt comfortable in their own skin in these schools; they were among other young children who had Afro-centric names and felt included. The importance of this supportive and nurturing environment was underscored when they were introduced to an integrated environment in first and third grade. Talib and Jamal came home and told us that they wanted to change their names to Peter and Jason. It was clear to us that they wanted to change their names so that they would feel more included in their new school environment. Because we had deliberately chosen their names to reflect our worldview about the importance of having a meaning-centered name connected to their culture and heritage, we informed them of the significance of their names and told them that if they wanted to change their names once they became an adult, they could do so. Talib and Jamal never came

back to us about the name change, and unlike many hip-hop artists, Talib Kweli decided to keep his given name, which means “student and seeker of truth and knowledge.”

Team sports also played a significant role in the lives of our sons. The emphasis on collectively working to achieve a common goal provides youth with diverse skill sets. They foster relationships with their peers and gain competence, discipline, skills, and respect for authority. My sons began playing baseball and soccer when they were five years old. Sports were particularly significant for my sons during their primary school years. The sports coach was another member of the village. And in the case of my sons, their father was the coach at various times throughout their primary school years. I am sure that this experience with their father left indelible memories for them.

The Teen Years

The outside school culture and environment present many challenges for young Black males. Despite our deliberate intentions to present alternative environments to our sons and to ensure that their first school experiences were grounded in our worldview about the importance of finding one’s passion and drawing on the educational, cultural, and social environment we provided, the teen years presented different challenges.

We changed schools in the last year of Talib’s stay at Summit JHS, a middle school for gifted Black youth in Brooklyn. Summit was located in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, a relatively progressive and integrated environment. Summit was originally housed in the district’s primary school and during his last year at Summit, it moved to a new location in a junior high school. We witnessed a dramatic increase in the incidents that Talib was exposed to on the way back from school to our new home in Flatlands, a suburb of Brooklyn. Talib had his sneakers

and coat stolen, and he began to focus on hip-hop, girls, and the culture of the 1990s. We decided to send him to a junior high school that was closer to home.

The culture of the 90s continued to take over. Fast forward to high school. Talib attended a specialized high school, Brooklyn Tech in Fort Greene.n. I quickly found out that popular and hip-hop culture continued to be more important than school. Talib spent the lunch period at Brooklyn Tech rapping in the cafeteria. He stopped attending classes and could be found in different areas of Brooklyn or in Washington Square Park. Gang violence was escalating in the city. The "village" was working. Neighbors called me about "hooky" parties in our home. My friends and professional colleagues talked to him. However, the situation continued to spiral out of control. Action was needed.

My husband and I carefully planned our actions. We decided to remove Talib from his circle of friends and place him in a boarding school in Connecticut. We wanted to send him a clear message that we were in control and that we were not going to give up on him. He would not become a victim of police brutality, a statistic in the criminal justice system, or at worse killed because of gang violence. Talib graduated from boarding school three years later. He was initially resistant to attending but eventually appreciated the structured and disciplined environment: required study hall sessions, required after-school activity; and required participation in a club. Upon reflecting on the actions we took, he thanked us for "saving his life." And when he turned 21, he again reiterated how thankful and privileged he felt. Too many of his peers were either in prison or had not made it to 21. If Talib, a bright young man who grew up in an environment surrounded by parents and a support network of adults,

thanked me, what has it been for young men who have not had these supportive environments? What has life been like for them and how do they survive?

The Adult Years

We live in a society constructed by race and despite what we do to protect our sons from experiences that target and stereotype them, we cannot prevent them from being targeted because of discrimination and racism. These experiences cut across economic and class, and I became acutely aware of the discriminatory and racist situations they encountered. I was the mother of a hip-hop artist who had begun touring while he was in his late teens. By the time his album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* was released in 1998, he had been on the road with his music for several years. In his early adult years, I learned to always pick up the phone and to accept calls, no matter the time of the night.

Two incidents that stand out are when Talib and his partner Hi-Tek were arrested in Cincinnati, Ohio, after neighbors called the police because they were playing music too loudly while sitting on the front porch. When the police came, arguments ensued and both were taken to the precinct, supposedly for resisting arrest. Talib, having been raised in New York City, knew that any perceived resistance to the police could result in more charges or in some form of police brutality. He proceeded to use logic and began a monologue informing the police that he and his partner were not criminals and that their time could better be spent arresting the real criminals. This did not persuade them, and he ended up in jail. When I got the call that night, my husband and I called on lawyers we knew and immediately began the 11-hour drive to Cincinnati. We wanted to be sure to be in the courtroom when Talib's case was presented to the judge. Talib was a student at New York University during this time. Our appearance, along

with the fact that we, two professors, had obtained a lawyer, was instrumental in having the case dismissed on the spot.

The second incident occurred when Talib and Hi-Tek were traveling to a concert in France. When they left the plane in London to get a connecting flight to Paris, they were immediately detained by the transportation security officers. They were told that someone had identified them as young men who were carrying drugs. Talib recounted how he and Hi-Tek were marched through the airport with cuffs on, how TSO informed them that they were only doing their jobs, and how they were thoroughly searched. It was a humiliating experience for both of them, and Talib continued to remind Hi-Tek that they should not make a scene. They were young Black musicians traveling abroad, and they had been targeted.

As parents, we know that Black men wear a badge that they cannot deny. The backlash received by men with Arabic names has exacerbated the situation. When Talib, whose name has Arabic origins, traveled right after 911, he often received second looks when he told flight receptionists or attendants his name. He recounted how a song by Stokely Carmichael was playing in the background while he was making flight reservations. When he got to the airport, he was not able to access his boarding pass, and the TSO was called. They took him into an office and thoroughly searched his luggage. The song had prompted the airline reservationist to target him. My son Jamal, whose name also has Arabic roots, recounted how when traveling to Israel, he was signaled out by Israelis who wanted to know why his parents had named him Jamal. His bags were thoroughly searched.

The fear in these situations is that we never know when the singling out of our sons as a result of racial profiling can take a wrong turn. We know of too many who end up in prison or

abused because a person in authority overreacted to the situation. We live with the reality of these fears. When Dr. Henry Louis Gates, a distinguished college professor, can be arrested and accused of breaking into his own home, you know that we as a nation are in serious trouble.

Solutions

What can we do as parents, as educators, and as leaders in our community to ensure the survival of our young men? I am concerned about my male grandchildren, for I know that despite the best efforts of their parents to protect them, they may be subjected to racial profiling. I have been reluctant to sit on juries involving the offenses of Black men because I don't entirely trust the system. However, while I don't entirely trust the legal system and its treatment of Black people, especially boys and men, we need to have a presence on juries for accountability reasons. Like many Black mothers across this nation, I was heartened when both of my sons turned 21. They had defied the statistics, but we know that their confrontation with law enforcement can happen at any age.

W.E.B. DuBois, born more than 150 years ago, prophesized in the forethought to *The Souls of Black Folk,* in 1903 that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." It is clear that DuBois' prophecy is still relevant in the 21st century. America has a race problem, and we witness it daily in our criminal justice system, housing system, health care system, educational system, and politics. The Charlottesville anniversary of the white supremacist rally, the criminalization of Black men, women, and youth in the prison industrial complex, the killing of unarmed Black youth and men, and the poor performance of too many of our youth in our public schools attest to the evidence that the color line is still a problem in

the 21st century. Although these issues may appear to be related to social justice, equity and class, they are inextricably linked to race and the problem of the color line.

As I reflect on the last four years of the insidious rhetoric, racism, and sexism that we have been subjected to and witnessed in politics and the media, I am reminded of the dramatic rise in race riots and lynching during the post-Reconstruction era in our country. We are once again witnessing how people in our nation have responded to their perception of a loss in power, changing demographics, and the fact that a Black man was president of one of the most powerful countries in the world. This rhetoric and these incidents represent "white backlash in the making."

The tragic murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, coupled with the coronavirus and institutionalized racism, have intensified unrest and despair and created a sense of urgency in our nation. There's been a seismic shift in the ways that people have responded to the continual violence, police brutality, murder, and racism faced by Black people in this country. Inaction is not acceptable. People from all races, ethnicities, genders, and walks of life have taken to the streets and have issued a "Call to Action" regarding discriminatory and inequity practices in criminal justice, voting rights, public health education, and more. In short, we are at a tipping point in our country.

In his book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Back Bay Books, 2002), Malcolm Gladwell defines the tipping point as a social epidemic, a point when an idea or message crosses a threshold, spreads through the public masses like wildfire, and creates a craze. The tipping point in our nation, resulting from the confluence of the tragic

murders of Black people, COVID-19, and attacks on the constitutional rights of people in our nation is earthshaking. The world is changed forever.

Where do we go from here? How do we address the killing of Black Men? As mothers, we have a lifetime of stories that we should continue to tell so that we can collectively resist and so that our sons will be remembered. We have stories that can help others to see how to cope and how to survive. Our stories of our lives can offer solutions to the challenges and dilemmas we face and can help us to conquer fear and to cope with pain as well as joy.

We have to be deliberate in our political actions. This means that we must call upon our elected officials to put measures in place that will prevent the incarceration of our men for minor offences and focus on restorative justice reform. We need more funding to support initiatives such as the Commission on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys and the equal justice initiative spearheaded by Bryan Stevenson. We must support male empowerment groups and mentoring groups across the nation. These groups exist in our schools, nonprofit organizations, and churches. The National Cares Mentoring organization, https://caresmentoring.org, spearheaded by Susan L. Taylor is an example of an organization that addresses the effects of intergenerational poverty and provides a blueprint for community recovery.

We have to help our sons find their passion. We must never give up on our sons and must be united in affirming and using the village. If we believe that the Black men in our community belong to all of us, we have a starting point for ensuring their survival. Remember, they are your sons too.

They Are Your Sons Too

Dedicated to Those Who Work With Our Sons

By Brenda M. Greene

They are part of the village, the community, the nation.

They are your sons too.

Treat them as you do your own sons.

Give them peace of mind.

They are your sons too.

Those who struggle to learn,

those who want to sing, to dance, to act,

those who bully, who fight, who cry,

those who play ball, who run track, who box,

they are your sons too.

Treat them as though they were part of you.

Nurture them.

Talk to them.

Give them hope.

Inspire their creativity.

Foster their genius.

Stir their imagination.

Surround them with love.

Create lasting memories.

They are your sons too.

Hear their cries for help.

Listen to their stories and music.

Listen to their words and lyrics.

Talk and “conversate” with them.

Celebrate with them.

Work with them.

Discuss! Discuss! Discuss!

Give of yourselves.

They are your sons too.

Create a safe place.

a peaceful place,

For Our Sons.