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It's a man's job: building strong black families

A Father's Day rally will reach out to dads, young men

By Sharon Kant-Rauch
Democrat Faith editor

A retired businessman, a recreational director, a minister who spent 12 years in jail and a social worker who grew up on the streets of Pensacola all have a passion for black youth.

That's why they're coming together to participate in the Father's Day March and Rally for Black Families in Crisis scheduled for June 18 at the Springfield Community Center on Joe Louis Street.

The event will run from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and include breakfast, lunch, speakers, a job fair and a march around the apartment complex and surrounding neighborhood. The public is invited.

"We want to reach out to fathers and tell them how important it is to be involved with their children," said Gary Montgomery, who started the Christian ministry Living Stones International four years ago.

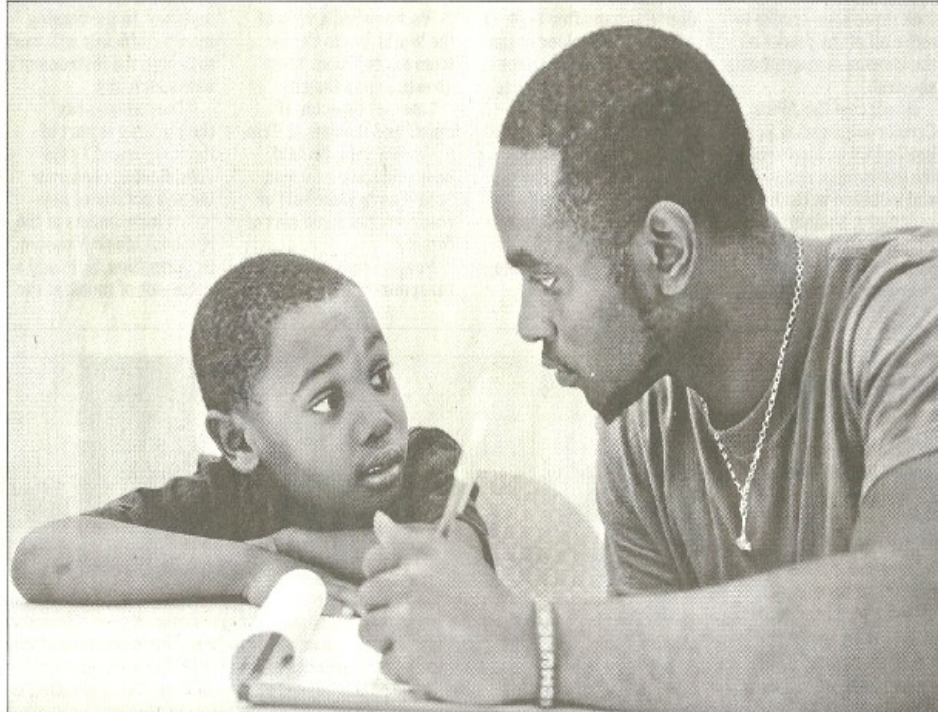
Montgomery had a successful business in Pensacola installing communications systems before retiring and moving to Tallahassee. He and his wife, Josephine, started Living Stones as a marriage ministry but soon expanded it. Today, Montgomery teaches classes in Wakulla Correctional Institution several times a week and is about to start a class for teen fathers.

He said research showed that 43 percent of babies born in Leon County in 2009 were from single mothers. Of those single moms, 93 percent were between 15 and 19 years old. It's one reason he's starting a group focused on teenage fathers.

'You get in trouble'

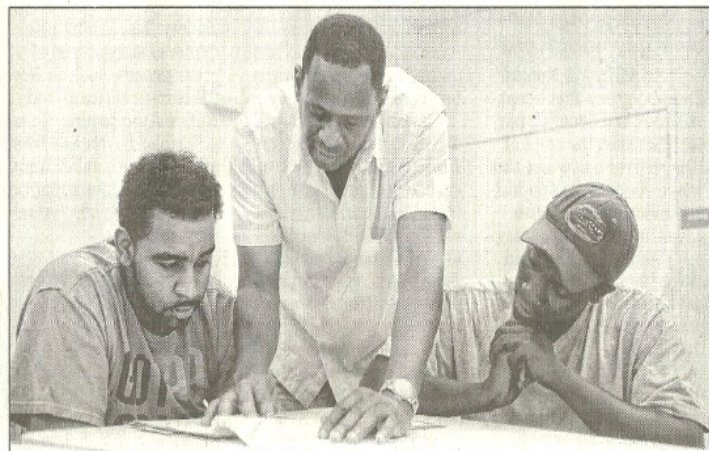
Larry Simmons, a social worker from the Tallahassee Housing Authority who's spearheading the rally, said the recent gang violence in Tallahassee also provided motivation for the Father's Day event.

"There is a gang that operates around Alabama Street called the Bama Boys," he said. "They've produced a professional video where they brandish guns and talk about violence. We want to make a statement to those kinds of people that the community is not going to just lie



MELINA VASTOLA/SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Darren Mason, right, a youth development coordinator, speaks with Jamichael Duncan, 6, during a mentoring session at the Springfield Community Center.



MELINA VASTOLA/SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

The Rev. Greg James, center, speaks with youth mentor Ramon Foster, left, and Javon Oneal, 15, during the recent mentoring session at the Springfield Community Center.

down and take it."

Simmons is speaking from experience. As a youth, he hung out with "notorious juvenile delinquents" in Pensacola. Then one day, a man in the community started a football team.

It turned Simmons' life around.

"I had athletic ability but it was going to waste," Simmons said. "I just didn't have the opportunity to play organized sports. When you're bored and you don't have anything to do, you get in trouble."

But because of the

neighborhood football team, Simmons eventually became an all-state football player.

The Rev. Greg James, a former pastor from Quincy, also is familiar with trouble. He spent 12 years in prison for dealing drugs, something he now says he did because of peer pressure.

When he got out of prison in 2008, James immediately started working with youth, trying to steer them in a good direction. He helped start the 1,000 Men Rally in Tallahassee and Quincy, and in January he launched a week-

ly mentoring program at Springfield Apartments.

When he shares his prison experiences, he said, the kids listen.

"They say, 'You don't look like somebody who has been to prison,'" he said. "But I tell them I wanted to be a part of what my friends were a part of, and that those choices led me to prison. My message is, identify with yourself, you don't have to be identified with other people."

'Children need you'

In May, a man was shot and killed outside the

Walker Ford Community Center where Joe Thomas has worked for 34 years. But Thomas, who also heads Visions of Manhood, a mentoring program for Tallahassee fathers who are ordered into the child-support system, said the violent killing is unusual.

"It doesn't destroy our efforts to do good things," he said. "We're doing programs in the schools, teaching students about being responsible young men. The idea is to target more young people to try to get them on the right track now."

But will any of Thomas' or the other men's programs work?

Christopher Brown, who has been through Montgomery's 12-week parenting class, is hopeful. Fifteen years ago, when he was 27, he suddenly became the primary parent of three baby girls when the children's mother died. He'd feed one baby with a bottle under his chin, put a second one on his lap and rock the third one in a car seat on the floor.

He was totally unprepared for fatherhood.

As a child, his stepfather abused him, he spent years in foster homes and he didn't have more than an eighth-grade educa-

IF YOU GO

What: Father's Day March and Rally for Black Families in Crisis (includes breakfast and lunch)

When: 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. June 18

Where: Springfield Community Center, 1702 Joe Louis St.

Contact: For more information or to make donations, contact Gary Montgomery at 765-0320 or gary@welivingstones.org, or Larry Simmons at 224-0558 or larrysimmons57@gmail.com.

tion. He knew nothing about plaiting a girl's hair or helping with homework.

Eventually, the girls went to live with their grandmother while he worked on construction jobs.

"I was trying to run from things," Brown said.

"Construction took my mind off of them, but I always knew that I was going to have to cut construction work short and get back to my kids."

When the grandmother passed away, a judge required Brown to take a parenting class before he could get custody of the girls again. That's when he started taking Montgomery's class.

For the first time, he shared his experiences with other fathers and it was like a dam burst.

"I was able to release a lot of things that had built up in me," he said. "I'm so thankful. It gave me a much better outlook."

Brown is now living with his teenage daughters and loving it.

He wants to reach out to younger fathers and tell them: Don't give up, your children need you. It's a message he hopes many men hear at the Father's Day March and Rally on June 18.

"No matter how hard it seems, how dark things look, God will see you through this valley to the shining on the other side," he said. "You just have to hold on."

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