

DeWanda Stewart-Joseph: From Personal Tragedy to Community Healing



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By Kate Coomber

DeWanda Stewart-Joseph was on her way home from work when she picked up my phone call. “Do you mind if I put you on hold for a minute while I order a burger? I had a taste for a burger and I wanted to order over the phone because I don’t want to sit in the restaurant anyway,” she confessed. We simultaneously let out a soft chuckle and agreed to reconvene within the half-hour. Having only met once before, a part of me worried that I had overstepped in requesting a sit-down interview at 5 pm on a weekday. Being that most people come home from work wanting nothing more than to put on a pair of sweatpants and catch the evening news, I wouldn’t have been surprised nor have taken offense if she were slightly standoffish in her demeanor. But what I found, and what I assume most who’ve crossed paths with Joseph have as well, was a unique sense of warmth and comfortability in the way she spoke, as if I were an old friend calling to catch up.

Her rare ability to make even a complete stranger feel at ease has no doubt been an essential tool when working with victims of gun violence, a cause she has dedicated the last decade of her life to. While many fighting against gun violence in America have strived to make change through

legislation, Joseph has made the biggest impact in helping the families and loved ones of victims on a far more personal level - helping through the grieving and healing processes.

Over the last 10 years, she has made a name for herself in the city of Richmond, California as a leader in gun violence prevention. In 2017 she founded the Ya-Neema Healing Circle, a place for the bereaved to unite in their support for one another. With millions losing loved ones to gun violence, “healing has to take place somewhere. And if the trauma continues to cycle through families and communities, people don't get better. That means we can have a generation coming behind us that could be very vicious.”

THE APPLE DOESN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE

Born and raised in the 1960s in Richmond, California, the city in which she still resides today, Joseph was brought up in an extended family household. Her grandmother was an active member of the community in that when a tragedy or death occurred in the neighborhood, she was one of the first to arrive at someone's doorstep in a show of support. Such support mostly came in the form of bringing food and offering a hand to hold as people sat in their pain.

As a young girl, Joseph was oftentimes brought along to these gatherings. It was thus at an early age, through watching her grandmother, that she learned how to effectively respond to other people's suffering. “I would just kind of observe. I didn't necessarily like doing it, but I think that's where I got that from - learning how to navigate through difficult situations and be empathetic towards what's going on with people.” The most important lesson Joseph took away was understanding when to “listen and not have to engage and when to listen and engage.”

TRAGEDY HITS HOME

Unbeknown to her at the time, much of Joseph's upbringing was seemingly preparing her for a life path she never saw coming. In 2010 tragedy hit her own family when her nephew, Ivan, was killed at the hands of gun violence. In the wake of such devastation, Joseph desperately sought out support. But she explains that when she reached out for mental health services or counseling in hopes of finding a place where her family could sit down and process their trauma, “there was no one there.”

The death of her nephew ultimately opened her eyes to a failing system within the city of Richmond. In the wake of a violent murder, much like Joseph's nephew, police will provide the victims' relatives with information regarding mental health resources usually in the form of a card or pamphlet. But such efforts from law enforcement aren't able to provide immediate care given that resources are distributed across all of Contra Costa County. With a lack of available service workers, many are forced to wait weeks on end to receive any kind of help. Joseph found

it important to mention that this phenomenon only applies to cases in which families actually manage to call. “In the wake of such tragedy and trauma most people aren’t in the mental state to wait on phone lines and fill out forms in a timely manner,” she says. “People in [my] community needed someone who was able to discern where they were and what was going on in [their] mental state in order to be able to help them through that trauma.”

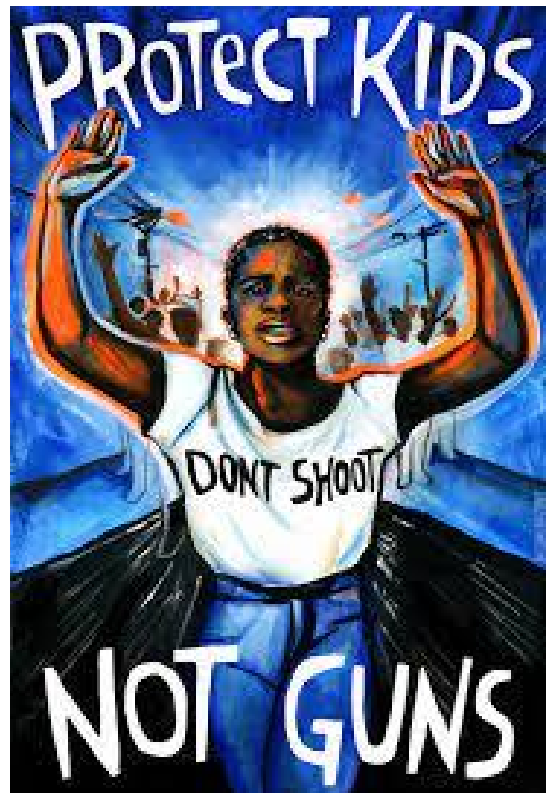
With no one else stepping up to help, it became clear to Joseph that the death of her nephew was calling her to a lifepath bigger than herself. “Death brings all kinds of gifts we don’t see because of the trauma and the pain that we’re suffering from,” she explains. “But it’s like a river that splits off and it took me on a course that I can’t say I would have followed otherwise.”

THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY LEADER

In 2011 Joseph began volunteering with the gun violence prevention program known as Operation Ceasefire. Her work with the organization was focused on educating members of her community on ways to reduce and prevent violence. In doing so, Joseph describes seeing “a lot of people that were in a lot of pain, and a lot of children that were being overlooked.” She couldn’t help but feel that there was more that she could be doing.

With the help of fellow Ceasefire volunteers, she began to deliver meals to the homes of families recently affected by gun violence. “I spent a lot of time riding, going from house to house and making sure people had food and knew that somebody was there to comfort them. Or even just to listen. To know someone cares enough to show up is very important.” And thus, in a strangely roundabout way, she found herself stepping into the shoes her grandmother once wore.

But it didn’t stop there. Her volunteer work, both in and out of Ceasefire, caused her name to gain notability within her community. As a result, she quickly became a go-to community resource in the wake of an act of gun violence. Whenever there was a shooting, her number was one of the first to be called. “Whatever was going on in my life, I’d stop and just get in my car and go,” she says. Once on scene, Joseph would locate a member of the victims’ family and ask for their phone numbers. The next day she’d get in contact with them, and the process of healing would



begin. “I’d ask them some questions. And most times I went to their homes and sat down with them. So I got to meet other family members as well.” From there she would help fill out violent crime paperwork, organize candlelight vigils, and plan memorial or funeral services - partnering with specific churches that wouldn’t charge families to come in.



By 2017, her contact list has expanded to the point in which, she could no longer reach out to each person individually. And after a double homicide in September of that year, both of which the victims came from a large family household, Joseph knew it was time to enlist for some help. Luckily, one of her professors from The School of Theology had taken notice of the work she was doing and offered his assistance. He became her right-hand man and together they founded the Ya-Neema Support Circle. The support group not only aided in distributing some of Joseph’s responsibilities but also provided a space for victims to process their grief once the initial shock had worn off.

PERSONAL COSTS

Within 7 years, Joseph successfully developed the system of community support she so desperately needed back in 2010. But helping others hasn’t always come without personal cost. In the midst of dedicating herself to helping her community, Joseph still had a family of her own to take care of. “My youngest daughter was getting ready to turn 18, and then I have a daughter a couple of years older than her. My grandchildren were also living in my household, so I had a full plate at home,” she admits. “I hope that I didn’t neglect anyone along the way.” While she took solace in knowing her children were supportive of her activism, this didn’t relieve the financial burden that came from working without pay. For the first 7 years, “I would just say thank you God for taking care of us,” she describes, “because I wasn’t making any money at that time.”

But aside from the financial costs, there have also been emotional prices to pay. Over the years, the constant inundation of tragic news and human suffering has been emotionally taxing on Joseph, to say the least. It was at this point in our discussion, as she began to recall some of the more devastating scenes she has witnessed, that I too began to feel a heaviness in my chest.

Once, when responding to a shooting on the corner of 37th Street and Cutting Blvd in Richmond, Joseph came across a 4-year-old crying in the middle of the chaotic crowd surrounding the crime scene. “I saw him walking from adult to adult and nobody was noticing him. I just got down low and put my arms out. He walked right into my arms and I just felt him laying on me.” It wasn’t until she returned home that she allowed herself to fully break down.

“When I got home, I got in the shower and cried,” she says before pausing to regain her composure. “I then said a prayer before going to bed,” she continues, “but even then my mind was still rolling.” While most would have succumbed to the pain, Joseph woke up the next day and carried on.

TAKING A STEP BACK

After 10 years of putting others first, Joseph has spent the last year taking care of the one person that had been put on the back burner - herself. The decision to take a step back came in light of the death of her partner from Covid-19. “I probably needed to take a break a long time ago,” she confesses, “because this has been going on consistently. But I didn't stop. I just kept going.”



Although still working to heal from her recent loss, she’s found that in taking time for herself she can both breath and sleep a little better. Yet while a break may have been long overdue, Joseph insists that she wouldn’t have done it any differently. “I would love that my nephew hadn't have died like he did. But because of that death, Ivan became my motivation. He got me to this point and none of it was a waste,” she assures.

In spite of such immense loss, Joseph’s journey has surpassed what she ever thought possible in terms of the building of rich, meaningful relationships both in and out of her community. Whether it be the Contra Costa County’s District Attorney’s Office, Richmond’s Chief of Police, members of the Ya-Neema Healing Circle, or any of the other countless individuals she’s met along the way, Joseph now has a long list of people who she can call on whenever she’s the one in need of assistance.

Although she plans on returning her focus to her support group and resuming her life of activism this year, Joseph hopes that, somewhere along the line, she has inspired someone enough to eventually follow in her footsteps.

