

AN OLD SCHOOL MESSAGE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS

# The CRISIS

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TOM  
JOYNER'S  
PASSION  
WITH A  
PURPOSE

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RICHARD  
WRIGHT'S  
CENTENNIAL

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A BRIGHT  
SPOTLIGHT  
ON GIVING

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# DRUM MAJOR

Forty Years  
After King's Death,  
His Legacy Still Resonates

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by Alexis A. Goring

# LIFTING UP, GIVING BACK

Changing one life at a time

“I

**f you want to lift your-  
self up,” Booker T. Washington once said, “lift up someone else.”**

He knew, as did his rival W.E.B. Du Bois, that uplift could take many forms. Donations of time, talent and energy, for example can often be more valuable than simply writing a check. *The Crisis* spoke with four individuals who are continuing African Americans' enduring commitment to lifting up others and changing the world—one life at a time.

“My parents always emphasized the importance of education,” Demetri Kornegay recalled. A police officer in Montgomery County, Md., he shares his parents' legacy by running Men Under Construction, an educational outreach program for African American boys.

Kornegay, 52, said his road to community service had an unlikely start. He initially pursued a career in broadcast journalism and, in 1982, landed a job in Washington, D.C., but was laid off

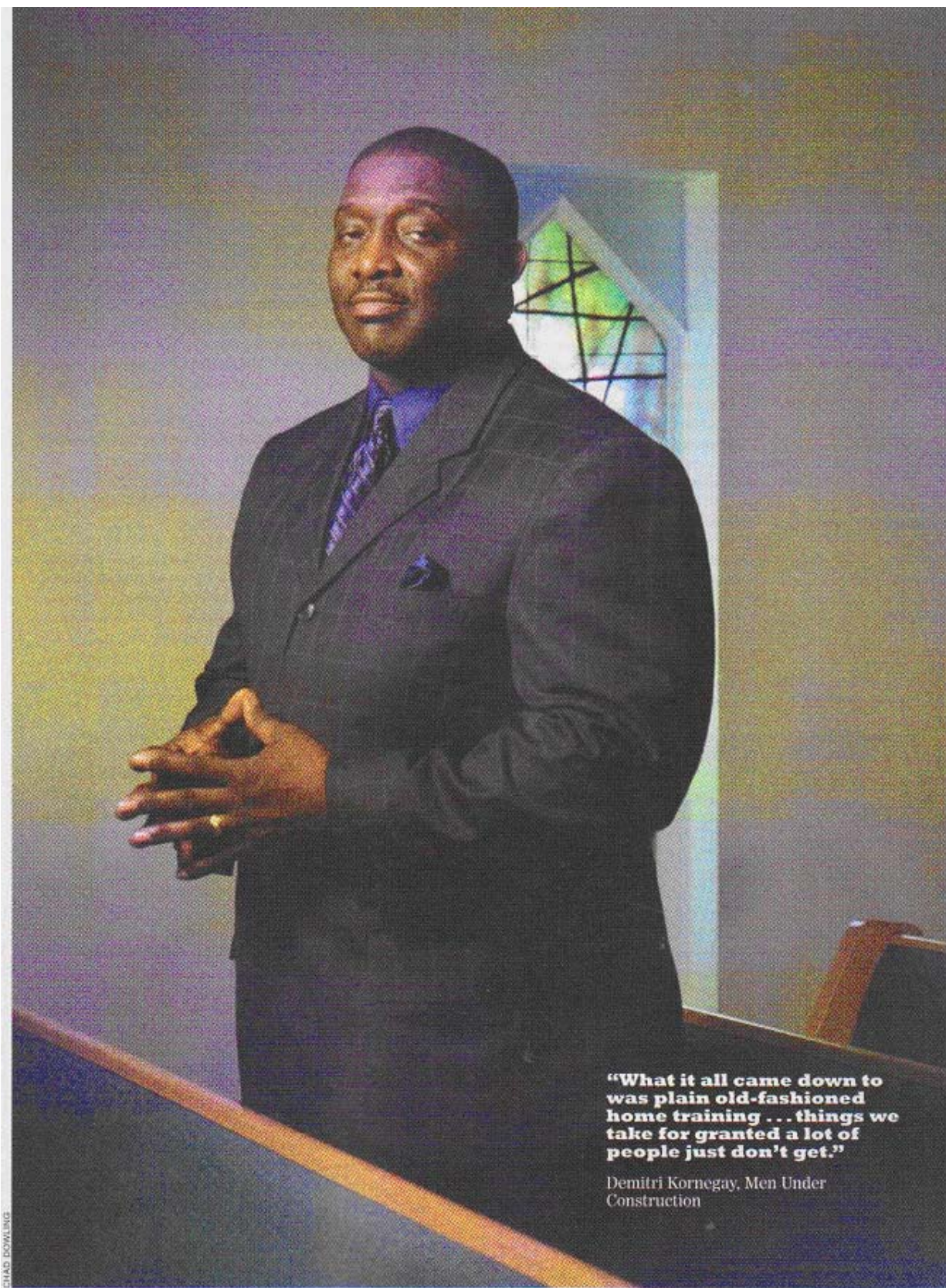
less than one year later.

Disappointment settled like a rain cloud over Kornegay's life at the time, but bright rays of sunlight were just over the horizon.

In 1983, he accepted an offer to join the SWAT team with the Montgomery County Police Department. One day, while he was working on the streets, Kornegay said, God opened the window into what would become his life calling.

The window provided a view into the lives of misguided youth entangled in the wrong lifestyle. In particular, the crack trade and its unforgiving impact on young Black males caused a stirring within Kornegay's soul that he could not ignore.

“What disturbed me a lot was to see people who looked like me being arrested for something like this [selling crack],” Kornegay said. “And it got in my soul and spirit to ask, “What could be done



**“What it all came down to was plain old-fashioned home training . . . things we take for granted a lot of people just don’t get.”**

Demitri Kornegay, Men Under Construction

to help these kids avoid being put into jail?"

"What it all came down to was plain old-fashioned home training," said Kornegay. "Things we take for granted a lot of people just don't get."

On a mission, Kornegay paid a visit in 1992 to Rev. Eugene Weathers of Galilee Baptist Church in Suitland, Md. That same year, Weathers, who died in 2000, helped Kornegay launch Men Under Construction, a series of classes that prepare young men for manhood.

"Men Under Construction has been a program and ministry as part of our church ministry instituted by Deacon Kornegay," said Rev. Lloyd T. McGriff, the church's senior pastor. "In doing so, he has literally touched the lives of hundreds of young men, transitioning them into adulthood."

Over the course of 14 weeks, young men ages 13 and older are taught a variety of life lessons, including how to respond to authority, successful job-hunting and managing a budget.

During the first meeting, they receive a history lesson about the struggles of their ancestors, followed by a current reality-check. "We talk about police and the minority community and how they've been in an adversarial position for years," said Kornegay.

David Garnett, an accountant, teaches classes on personal finance for Men Under Construction.

"I think they've learned how important it is to kind of tell your money where to go by budgeting it out each month," said Garnett. "It gives them a great foundation to see their need to budget for the family."

At the end of the 14-week program, Kornegay wants his students to have learned how to be leaders. "If you don't lead anything else, you're going to lead a family one day," he tells them. "And your kids are going to expect you to take them to the right place and give them the right opportunities."

For Rev. McGriff, the seeds Kornegay sows yield a rich harvest. "Lives get changed, families get strengthened, communities get blessed and God gets the glory," he said.

**LIKE KORNEGAY, PATRICK M. OLIVER** is committed to sustaining the values of his elders. Born and raised in Little Rock, Ark., he left his hometown at age 19 to live in Los Angeles. He discovered his true calling, however, when he found his way home.

In 1997, Oliver, now 50, founded Say It Loud! Readers and Writers, a program that enables children to improve their literacy skills and develop a love of reading by meeting with published authors. Oliver's motto: "Bringing the community together through literature."

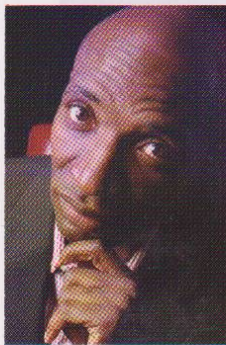
"The primary initiative was to provide an opportunity for children and youth to embrace reading and writing as tools of empowerment,"

said Oliver. Local and visiting writers join the young participants in what Oliver calls "writing and discussion sessions."

Adriani Gardner, who teaches communications at the University of Central Arkansas and volunteers with Say It Loud!, told *The Crisis* that becoming involved with the program is not a decision—it's a conviction.

**"This interaction and networking has led to numerous individuals improving their lives and working in careers they aspire to."**

Patrick M. Oliver, Say It Loud!



BELOW: ERONY BLEVINS, RIGHT, COURTESY CARLA STOKES

"Patrick convicts individuals to get involved with our personal past, present and future—African American youth," said Gardner. "He is very committed and dedicated to addressing one of the nation's most depressing and shameful ills—the lack of literacy. And, for that, our entire community should be proud."

More than 5,000 youth and adults have participated in activities and events since the program's founding. In addition to attending workshops with authors, participants go on field trips to visit cultural centers, literary events and conferences across the nation.

Photographer Jamel Shabazz also lends his time and talent to Say It Loud! He said he began working with the program in hopes of creating change.

"Having worked in a correctional facility for 20 years, I witnessed firsthand an unjust criminal court system that is designed to warehouse young African American males," he said. "This necessitated me to be proactive in an organization that was committed to our youth, and Say It Loud! is that unique program."

For Oliver, Shabazz's perspective fits perfectly with the program's



**"What motivated me to finish my dissertation was the belief that I would one day be able to use my research to help uplift Black girls."**

Carla Stokes, HOTGIRLS Inc.

ultimate goals. "This interaction and networking has led to numerous individuals improving their lives personally, completing educational endeavors and working in careers they aspire to," he said. "And, most important, they become productive citizens in their communities."

**FOR GORDON JOHNSON**, community begins with family. He is the president and CEO of Neighbor to Family, a program designed to keep siblings in the foster care system together under one roof, not separated into different homes.

Johnson, 74, is a veteran of social services. Formerly head of the Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services, he left that agency in 1990 to become president of Jane Adams Hull House Association in Chicago. While there, he developed some of the concepts that led to his current venture, Neighbor to Family, incorporated in Daytona Beach, Fla., in 2000. "I found this as a calling and a mission that has lifted me up to continue in this work even though I'm in retirement age," said Johnson, who describes his work as "very satisfying."

He said the name of his project derives from its purpose. "It's neighbors working with families that live in the same neighborhood, helping them with their children. The neighbors are trained foster care givers. This allows the children to live and go to school in the same community where they had resided with their parents."

Johnson said his program is active in five other states, "serving about 5,000 children and keeping siblings together in one foster home."

When Johnson worked as a state official, he was responsible for removing children from unsafe situations and placing them in a secure environment. However, because of the poor quality of foster homes, he was not always able to accomplish his goal.

"I decided that I needed to address this problem in the private sector," said Johnson, "where there would be more flexibility and opportunities to try a different approach."

That approach includes foster parents like Kathleen Bushong. Before becoming a foster parent, Bushong spent 30 years in property management, longing for something more.

"I've always had a yearning to be with the children," said

Bushong. "And this [Neighbor to Family] has enabled me to do it. This is probably one of the hardest jobs I've ever experienced but yet the most rewarding."

She has high regards for the company's founder.

"Johnson is such an awesome individual," said Bushong. "He's so true and sincere and through thick and thin, he's there."

Especially impressive to Bushong are the men who give their time and talent to becoming caregivers.

"Usually the mother's the one to keep the family together," said Bushong. "But with Neighbor to Family the foster fathers really come together—unbelievable! When they have the respect and they have the support and the encouragement, these men excel."

At the end of the day, Bushong believes that every moment of being involved as a foster parent with Neighbor to Family is worth it.

"I just love the whole thing because I just love keeping the family together and helping them to be redirected," she said. "And the most beautiful part is how hard these parents work to reunite with their children . . . Neighbor to Family is the whole enchilada of the family, the community."

Johnson describes his work in similarly optimistic terms. "What brings a smile on my face is that we continue to see the fruits of the labors of people wanting to help people," he said.

Ten years from now, Johnson will be 85 years old but he says permanent retirement is not an option. He plans to continue the work that keeps him going, Neighbor to Family.

**CARLA STOKES** also appreciates the benefits of a safe family setting. Raised in Silver Spring, Md., she learned from supportive parents who instilled the value of education in her when she was quite young.

"They also spoke to me a lot about influential African Americans and the need for African Americans who were successful," said Stokes.

Many years and several diplomas later, she has become one of those successful African Americans— with a plan and a purpose in life. For her, motivation is a primary key to success.

"What motivated me to finish my dissertation was the belief that I would one day be able to use my research to help uplift Black girls," she said. A graduate of Spelman College, Stokes, 32, earned a master of public health degree and a doctorate in health behavior and health education from the University of Michigan.

"I think sometimes we get caught up in holding each other down instead of giving back," she said.

Stokes decided to give back by establishing a place where Black girls and young women would be inspired and educated about how they can work through the hard-knocks of life and turn challenges into success. In November 2001, she founded HOTGIRLS Inc., an Atlanta-based nonprofit providing health education, youth development, media literacy and tech programming. The name is an acronym for "Helping Our Teen Girls In Real Life Situations." The organization's Web site is [helpingourteengirls.org](http://helpingourteengirls.org).

"I felt that our issues were being overlooked," said Stokes. "I wanted to especially

create something that focused on young girls.

"The girls are developing a social conscience and creating their own ideas and programs where they are inspired to go out and not just talk about issues but do something about it," said Stokes.

The leaders of HOTGIRLS work hard to develop educational strategies and media literacy efforts that are accessible and culturally relevant.

"We integrate popular youth culture into our programming and workshops," said Stokes, who uses various forms of media and current issues to facilitate the learning process. "We just make sure that it's youth friendly and youth driven."

Stokes knows that sexist and misogynist images have an influence that extends across the country and beyond. Accordingly, she has big plans for her organization.

"We would like to be able to expand our program to other cities and reach other girls outside of Atlanta," said Stokes. "Ideally, I would like to see some of the girls who attended the program run the programs in different cities in their local communities. We'd like to create a movement."

That may not be easy, but Stokes is ready for the challenge.

"I feel like I have a calling and this is what I'm supposed to be doing," said Stokes. "It's just satisfying knowing that I'm helping girls and doing my part to make the world better for young people."

And lifting us all up in the process.

**Alexis A. Goring** is a graduate of Columbia Union College with a degree in print journalism.

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