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The new Black view

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Black Men on the Firing Line

By Dr. Lenora Fulani

Two weeks ago, I went to the burial of my first cousin Sandy's 29-year-old son. He was murdered by another young black male in Florida. I had never met her son, Gibran, but knew of him and I knew what it meant to grow up black and poor in Florida. Sandy and I grew up together in Chester, Pennsylvania and over the years I have experienced her fury at and fears for him. I know that fear. I myself have a son and as a mom have grappled with how to help him maneuver a life as a black American male.

Sandy's father, Paul, was my mother's brother. Both he and my father and various other men in my family were alcoholics. They fought in our country's wars, worked at jobs that were somewhat plentiful in the late 50's, and struggled with the humiliation and assault of being black men in America. They covered it over—the anger, pain and the attack on their manhood—with drink, misguided fury and an unspoken despair.

My father died when I was twelve. For years I had made it my business to clean up all of the wine bottles under his bed. I was fiercely protective of him, as was Sandy of my Uncle Paul. We both loved our fathers deeply and somehow knew that they lived with relentless and unspeakable pain. I spoke briefly at the memorial in Philadelphia, sharing that I had recently been to Ferguson where Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer who had no remorse for Michael's death. I said that in many ways my cousin's son and Michael had died from the same malady: America's abandonment of the African American community—and the particular abandonment of poor and working class African American men.

I have also been watching the demonstrations and the energy of America's young—black and white—as they marched through the streets of New York and other cities in opposition to the police and this culture of violence. I understand their fury and love them for their integrity. I have participated in numerous marches over the years in response to police shootings and racial killings of black and Latino males. More often than not, the fury and marches peter out because at some point we all have to go back to business as usual. That is, until the next shooting!

However, if we want to break this cycle, we have to do something other than just react to the numerous situations when things go wrong or injustice occurs. And we have to go beyond our fury at the "beat cop." We have a system that fails us and young black men every day, which has created the prison pipeline for black men because it won't create an America where all can flourish. Yes, we have the right and obligation to demand justice. But we need to demand justice from all quarters: from a school system that does not educate; from the politicians who hide behind their fear of losing elections; from the teachers unions who pit our kids and parents against what is best for learning and development. We need to demand continuous and bigger forms of Justice!

I currently run a program called Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids where I listen to the cops and teenagers express a lot of the same fears, the fear of losing their lives in the streets and of not being able to return home to their families at the end of the day. I, like many New Yorkers in all communities, was deeply upset by the useless shooting of Officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Lui. On Christmas Eve Day, I convened a UNITY FOR THE CITY gathering where police officers, youth and the community came together to make a statement about the need to come together to overcome the violence. One police officer who spoke to the overflow crowd

said we need peace, love and understanding. And, yes, we do need peace, and our communities also need power.

I've invested a lot of energy and expertise into creating a context in which police and young people can see the other and share some of their concerns, using innovative approaches that allow for them to have a totally different experience of being with the other. The poor community feels it needs the police on the streets, and that is real. So is the outrage at what the police often do on those streets.

The fact is that we have to do some harder and more difficult things after we march. We have to engage, for example, the growing poverty in our communities and the abandonment of the poor by the people who run this country and our cities. We have to take seriously what it means to try to function in social and political institutions that don't work for or with us. We have to look at who and what creates the circumstances that make it impossible to function in the world and live decent lives. We have to consider whether all those we believe to be our allies—such as the Democratic Party, for example—truly are. In many ways, the police are the least of the problem. They are often left to navigate the responses to and outrage about the circumstances that occur because of the failure of these societal institutions. But what about the responsibility of those who run them? Why don't the politicians do more than show up at a protest march after the fact? What are the people of our city who are being abandoned supposed to do about the reactions to that abandonment? What should they do with their fury?

I work with people of all ages in our various programs at the All Stars Project. I hear stories from the teenagers of how they go hungry when there is little to eat in the refrigerator so that their younger siblings will have something for dinner. I comfort them when they fail chemistry and science tests and have never had a chemistry or science book or a teacher who could teach the subject matter. I feel outraged when scholars with Harvard degrees tell me that our children do poorly in school because their mothers don't read to them or teach them enough vocabulary. My mother had a 6th grade education and had to work hard to help feed and clothe me. What about that reality?

Over the past two years, more and more black men have started to participate in our programs. I see in them the struggles of the men in my family. They, like my father and uncles, have lived very hard lives and are filled with the emotional challenges of what it means to be a black male—unloved and unappreciated—in America. I love them for finding their way to us and I help them express the despair that has been their lives and the burden of hiding that pain, not to mention the often unexpressed fury of not being allowed to be a “real” man in this country. I listen to the subjective torment of our poor who blame themselves for America's refusal to include us, and who have been taught that America's poverty is their shame.

I am currently leading a series of talks throughout our city on Democracy and Development as a key to the advancement of our people. Yes, we should march, whether the politicians encourage or discourage us, but we must also become more sophisticated and learn how to navigate and re-engineer the faults in our democratic system to make it work on our behalf. I look forward to our continued work together as we struggle as a community—and a country—to grow. I write this in memory of Paul Gibrán Howard Johnson: May you rest in peace!

Lenora Fulani is co-founder of the All Stars Project, Inc., a constellation of privately-funded afterschool development programs which serve more than 10,000 inner-city youth and adults each year, among them Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids, a program she directs in partnership with the New York City Police Department.