

The New York Times

New York Today: Police and Teens, Connecting



Lenora B. Fulani, center, founder of Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

By ALEXANDRA S. LEVINE, MARCH 30, 2017

Lenora B. Fulani, center, founder of Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Good morning on this sort-of-sunny Thursday.

What happens when you bring together 10 teenagers from poor communities and 10 police officers to try to get them to talk?

Empathy ensues.

“When the cops hear the kinds of things that these kids have gone through — a kid saying, ‘I hate cops because when I was 7 you barged into my house and you took my Dad away and I never saw him again,’ cops have said to kids, ‘I don’t know how you live through this,’” said **Lenora B. Fulani**, a developmental psychologist who founded and runs **Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids**.

Through theater and improvisation, the program aims to improve the often-contentious relationship between the police and youths from ages 15 to 21 in black and Latino communities.

The empathy goes both ways, Dr. Fulani told us. “When I ask the cops what the hardest thing is about being a cop, the kids are really disturbed that the cops are not home for Christmas and that they’ve missed 10 holidays.”

And just like that, Dr. Fulani said, snapping her fingers in the air, “the humanity surfaces on both sides. It’s very beautiful.”

The program started after the deadly police shooting of Sean Bell in Queens in 2006. Today, 7,500 New York police

officers have either participated in a private workshop or watched a public performance at venues including the Police Academy in Queens, the Apollo in Harlem and the Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn.

And in 2017, it feels more relevant than ever.

“A lot of police shootings have been in the national media, and people are riled up and reactive, as they should be,” Dr. Fulani said. “However, we’re not in a position in our communities to say to the cops, ‘Get out,’ because we need them.”

What both parties typically discover, Dr. Fulani said, is that they have a lot more in common than they might expect if they were to meet on a street corner.

A 21-year-old participant could be the same age as a rookie police officer.

The hope is that, once both sides find common ground, future interactions can be more civilized, Dr. Fulani said.

“When you’re standing on that street corner and you’re a cop and you see a kid doing something really stupid, unless they’re pointing a gun at you, you can pause and figure out, ‘What else can I do here?’”

Dr. Fulani was one of more than 100 people nominated by New York Today readers as a model New Yorker who has made a difference in the community. If you would like to share a story about another exemplary neighbor, you can write to us at nytoday@nytimes.com.