A Path Far From The Past

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By Elaine Seay

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Most students at Oklahoma State University are unaware of the corrupt childhood pasts that some of their fellow students have experienced.

Many challenges from people’s past go unnoticed and others that are facing the same things become unnoticed as well. Challenging childhoods should be put under a light that makes more people understand that the issue needs more attention.

Past experiences leave a lasting impact on OSU junior Annasthaeyzsia Samuel’s life that led her to start the program “A New Day, A New Way” that focuses on challenges young girls face while growing up. Samuel said the program is her way of showing other young girls a way to escape the depraved childhood experiences they are going through.

Samuel began the program this year concerning the way young African-American girls ages 12-18 have traditionally been educated and raised. Samuel said the younger girls involved in this program have experienced things beyond anything any child should. They have witnessed or experienced several instances of sexual acts, pregnancy, violence, drugs, and abandonment and incarceration of their own parents Samuel said.

Samuel said she is from a beat down area of eastside Oklahoma City, Okla. and had numerous mentors, family members and friends try their hands at raising her. Although her road was much bumpier than others, Samuel said she was strong enough to pull through.

It was as simple as a video to inspire her to develop this program Samuel said.

“I watched a video of Will Smith where he asks ‘Was the world a better place because you were in it?’” Samuel said. “Being confronted with these thoughts and the secrets shared with me by the young girls in the church, I realized that I had to go deeper lest they sink.”

Samuel is on to bigger and better things, in college working towards her degree. Samuel said that her personal past experiences and those of friends combined to initiate a passion for preventing a corrupt childhood for other young girls in situations like she was.

Samuel said her childhood had numerous bad experiences. In the fifth grade, she and one of her classmates happened upon one of their classmates performing sexual acts in a ditch on their elementary school playground. She said she had a friend get pregnant at age 13. Also, Samuel told the story of a young girl in her church group that was repeatedly raped by her stepfather. The young girl’s mother wouldn’t even believe her. Samuel said many other children in her church group had parents incarcerated for various reasons and others whose parents abandoned them.

Of the group of 40 girls that she went to school with, only 11 of them don’t have children and only five of them made it to college Samuel said. These trials are nothing compared to some of the things the girls in her program have seen or experienced.

Violent crimes including rape and assault are 1.49 times the national average, according to the City Rating.com Crime Statistics Web site.

“With so much going wrong in their lives, it amazes me that these girls have not crumpled right before my eyes before now,” Samuel said.

What a young person experiences during their childhood and their present lifestyle has a large impact on their mental health, according to the Association for Natural Psychology Web site.

Samuel said she settled on four things needed: an innovative way to reach them, something to keep their attention, something effective to actually help them, and something that would make a lasting impact on their lives. The mission statement for “A New Day, A New Way” is helping, developing and teaching young girls through spirituality, education, personality and socialization.

Samuel said she meets with these girls every first and third Friday of the month, presenting a new issue that their lives may encounter during each session. A range of components of this program keep the young girls involved.

The young girls perform acts of community service and are paired up in a “buddy system” to encourage good sisterly relationships together so that they may support one another Samuel said. These young girls are helping others in order to help themselves.

Samuel said many speakers, which are all friends of hers, come to tell these young girls their stories. The speakers come from many walks of life and let the girls know that there are others out there that understand what they are going through; that it is possible to overcome.

Samuel said the journal element of her program is the most personal. It is a journal that each young girl has for Samuel’s eyes only. The young girls communicate through their writing as it is sometimes much easier to write something down then to say it Samuel said. This component of the program allows her to get inside these young girls’ minds and really understand what they are going through or thinking.

To all of these younger girls, Samuel said she sees herself as the big sister that she wished she always had. To many, she may even be a maternal figure. Samuel said the struggles of these young girls are appalling, but the work she is doing to make a difference attempts to shine a whole new light on the situation of challenges youth face.

Samuel said she has no intention of this program ending; it is merely the beginning. She still plans to be a part of these young girls’ lives once she graduates.

“I did not come this far with them to just abandon them,” Samuel said.

Samuel is working with a friend of hers from high school to get the program started in another church in Oklahoma City. Samuel said she is also training two of the younger girls that are presently in her program in hopes that “A New Day, A New Way” will continue to grow. Samuel said she wants to continue to make a difference in these and more younger girls’ lives; tending to their need for a way to escape their scarring childhoods.

Samuel said she has many friends that support and believe in her program and the impact she is trying to have on these young girls’ lives. Keiara Morrison is one of Samuel’s good friends who has witnessed the program firsthand.

“I believe the program has become an instant success, and with the continued love and dedication from Ms. Samuel, I see the children having very bright futures,” Morrison said.

Samuel said she sees the challenges youth face as an issue that is somewhat pushed under the rug, seen as less important than others or unseen altogether. Her individual experience with a rough childhood inspired her to create “A New Day, A New Way” so that other younger girls do not have to go through the things she did, hoping her strength will give them strength of their own.

“I am investing in the future of these girls so that they will one day do the same for others,” Samuel said. “But most importantly, I am investing in them because I can see the potential in them even when the rest of the world stomps out the light in their eyes.”

**Sources**

1. Annasthaeyzsia Samuel  
   (405) 922-8309

[annasthaeyzsia.samuel@okstate.edu](mailto:annasthaeyzsia.samuel@okstate.edu)

1. Keiara Morrison

(405) 210-7817

[keiaram@okstate.edu](mailto:keiaram@okstate.edu)

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