

## **Kiamsha Mentors Become Ideal Couple**

Harmony Newsletter

“I had no where to live; I had nothing to eat, no water to bathe and clean with, I had no gas to help keep me warm, or air to cool off; not TV to watch, and I turned to the streets because that’s the only place where everybody else like me was welcomed when I was going through all of this...” said Kenneth Ledbetter, a graduate of the Pen or Pencil program.

Today, Ledbetter is not ashamed to tell his story to anyone who will listen. Although he stands up alone, Ledbetter speaks for thousands of youth in his predicament who are forced everyday to make difficult choices. Some are still living on the streets, some are locked up in juvenile detention centers, some are growing up in the foster care system, others are simply forgotten. All of them have a choice.

The choice is to choose the road that will provide education and a positive and productive place in the community. The alternative is a road that will lead to destruction and eventually the penitentiary. The goal of the Pen or Pencil program is to help these youth recognize that they have options and steer them down the correct path. Making the choice is not difficult, actually it is very simple.

“I am a grown man, you know what I’m saying,” said a youth currently locked down at Challenger Memorial Youth Center in LA county, California for the fourth time. ‘It’s not hard. I make whatever decisions I want to make for myself.’

After enrolling in the Pen or Pencil Program at the juvenile detention center, he now feels that his life is going to change. Despite the pressures he faces behind bars to partake in illegal activities, he is ready to leave the juvenile detention center in a few months, graduate high school and eventually go to college; leaving the life of a gang banger behind.

Ledbetter, a group of young men at Challenger juvenile detention center and youth from North Carolina, Washington, D.C., Arkansas and Memphis chose to live a life free of violence for 40 days. The initiative was sponsored by the Pen or Pencil program on the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a way for the young men and women in the program to showcase their commitment to King’s non-violent method.

“It’s my goal to be productive, and I’m glad that so many came together with us from all kinds of places like Challenger did and decided that 40 days without violence was a first step for a more extensive journey to manhood,” said Ledbetter.

After entering the Pen or Pencil Program, the Kiamsha Youth Empowerment has been asked to provide dedicated students with first-hand support and training. The Kiamsha training will arm them with the skills to maintain their convictions in the face of modern day slave masters who will attempt to leer them from the positive course they have chosen.

Carlvern and Paula Dunn, mentors of the Kiamsha Youth Empowerment Organization, explain how negative choices and incarceration affect family life. Today, they are using their experiences to teach others the true meaning of "Til' Death Do Us Part" and motivating youth to choose the right path.

"I've been where you are," Carlvern said to the youth at Challenger Memorial Youth Center. "Reduced to nothing more than an inmate number. This is not living."

The Dunns now represent the family unit and the importance of marriage as the premier couple of the Healthy Marriage Initiative. Both the Healthy Marriage initiative and the Pen or Pencil Program are organized by the National Alliance of Faith and Justice (NAFJ). The programs are used collaboratively to attempt to finally solve many of the issues apparent in the community.

"I am a man of valor. It's important for all you to know about my journey," said Ledbetter as he speaks again to a room full waiting faces. They are transfixed as he tells of his struggles and his achievements.

It's a story full of hope. Hope that Ledbetter and thousands of others have found via the Pen or Pencil Program.