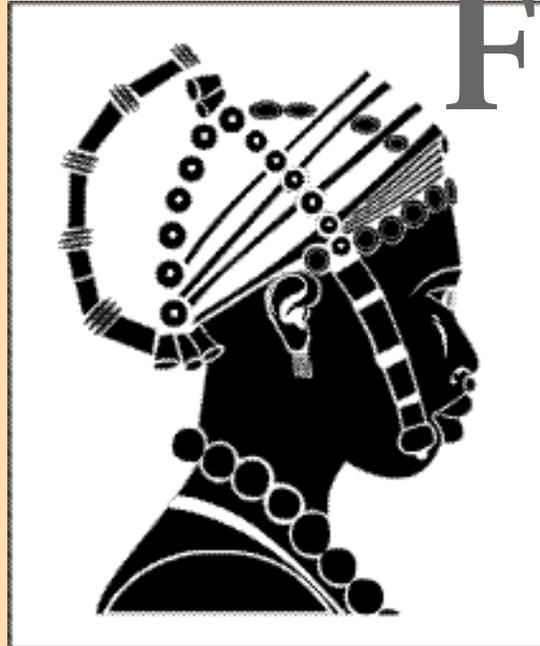


AAAAC

African American Advisory Council Newsletter

Fall 2006

LADIES FIRST



*Girls, Women the Focus of
Recent Annual Conference*



African American Advisory Council

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African American Advisory Council Newsletter Spring 2006

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From the Chairperson

Once again I want to thank participants that attended the African American Advisory Council's Fourteenth Annual Institute on April 20 and 21, 2006. We appreciate your attendance, participation, and feedback at this annual event.

Co-chairs Frances Elbert, Jackie Bright, and the conference planning committee along with staff from the Division of Training and Development did an excellent job in putting the institute together. (Unfortunately Jackie was unable to attend due to an injury, but she contributed in a major way to the success of this conference.) You will read more about the Institute in this issue, and plans are already underway for the 2007 Institute that will take place on April 26 & 27, 2007. Don't forget to save the date.

Updates on Council Activities

The annual spring joint meeting between the Council and the Hispanic Advisory Committee (HAC) took place on May 18, 2006. Our two organizations meet bi annually during the spring and winter. We are continuing our efforts to improve services to incarcerated youth. At the request of Director Samuels, presentations will be made to executive staff regarding information gathered from focus groups and surveys pertaining to incarcerated youth.

We are also concerned about children of incarcerated parents having visits, and appropriate preparations for visits with their parents. AAAC and HAC have several subcommittees that are working on issues of mentoring new staff, participating in interviewing new employee candidates by members that are Rutan certified, and conference related matters. HAC will host the next joint meeting in December. We will provide updates from these meetings

in future newsletters from both organizations.

We held our monthly annual meeting in Southern Region's East St. Louis office on June 15, 2006. As always, this was a productive meeting, and we appreciate the warm welcome that we received from staff. There was a follow-up discussion from the last meeting that took place in 2005 regarding staff concerns. The Council has been in collaboration with the Deputy Director of Affirmative Action pertaining to the identified issues. We will continue to dialogue with Director Samuels and Deputy Directors on issues that staff have brought to the Council's attention.

The Council is assisting in a major collaborative effort that is being planned for Central Region regarding permanency enhancement. Details about this project will be unveiled in the months ahead from Central Region Management staff. We are excited about playing a role in making this effort come into fruition. AAAC members from Central Region have been instrumental in surfacing issues that will be addressed within this project. I encourage you to look for information regarding this initiative.

In closing, as the summer of 2006 is winding down, and children are preparing to return back to school, I'm encouraging everyone to heighten their efforts to make the upcoming school year a great learning experience for youth in substitute care. If youth are going to overcome the obstacles that they face from being in the child welfare system, they need all of the educational support that we can provide, regardless of their academic level of achievement. We continue to emphasize the utilization of community-based service



**Michael D. Burns,
AAAC Chairperson**

Investing in the Well-Being of Our Daughters

The African American Advisory Council held its 14th Annual Conference in Naperville, Illinois, from April 20-21. The theme of the conference was Investing in the Well-Being of Our Daughters.

The conference focused on providing pertinent information to case workers to help them better work with young African American women, girls, and their mothers (discussion included males also) in the child welfare system. Workshops and lectures were focused on issues ranging from adolescent sexuality to understanding domestic violence. The two-day event also provided an opportunity for child welfare professionals to exchange ideas and information as well as network with colleagues from around the state.

In recognition of African American culture and style, the event began on Thursday April 20th with a libation ceremony, and a rendition of the Negro National Anthem led by Verleaner Weathington. Formal greetings were extended to conference participants through council chairperson Michael D. Burns, co-chairperson Frances Elbert, and DCFS director Bryan Samuels. Additional remarks and words of encouragement were given by Robin Staggers, Chief of African American Affairs; Arthur Bishop, Deputy Director of Field Operations and Erwin “Mac” McEwen, Deputy Director of Agency Performance Monitoring and Quality Assurance. “Mac” delivered a stirring message to conference participants.

Following the opening remarks, AAAC presented awards to IDCFS staff who have distinguished themselves by providing outstanding services to DCFS children and families. The awards went to nine employees: Chief Deputy General Counsel for IDCFS Debra Dyer; Family Development Specialist Willa Guidi; Child Welfare Advanced Specialist Margaret Jones-Washington; Associate Deputy of Child Protection and Community Service Keith Langston; Child Welfare Advanced Specialist Charlene Moron-McCuen; Child Welfare Specialist Stacie McKinney-Wallace; Community Social Service Planner Lucille Pearson;

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DCFS Director Bryan Samuels (from left), Keith Langston, Associate Deputy of Child Protection and Community Service; Arthur Bishop, Deputy Director of Field Operations; and Erwin McEwen, Deputy Director for Performance Monitoring and Quality Assurance, gather at the recent African American Advisory Council conference.



Sheree Hammond (from left), Tanya Garden-Smith and Melanie Campbell at the 14th Annual AAAC conference.



DCFS Director Bryan Samuels (center) is flanked by award recipients at the 14th annual African American Advisory Council conference. The recipients were honored for their contributions to the agency.

AAAC Award Recipients

The AAAC recognizes that advocating for youth and families with the Illinois Child Welfare system is a quest. Consequently, every year during its annual conference, the AAAC recognizes DCFS staffers who have tirelessly provide dutiful service and technical expertise with the department. The following 2006 award recipients (nominated by their peers) demonstrated their ability to go beyond the call of duty, and selflessly dedicated themselves to making society a better place for children and their families.

Debra Dyer is the Chief Deputy General Counsel of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services at Cook County Juvenile Court. She has worked for DCFS for the past 15 years, and oversees all court matters involving DCFS children. She has worked for DCFS over the past 15 years, and oversees all court matters involving DCFS children. A graduate of Jackson State University, Debra also holds a master degree from The University of Chicago and a Juris Doctorate from Chicago Kent College of Law.

Willa Guidi has been employed by DCFS for the past 22 years. A family development specialist in the foster care licensing division, she also carries the distinction of being one of the few African- American operatic trained vocalists in Illinois. Both clients and peers adore Willa.

Margaret Jones-Washington has been a Child Welfare Advanced Specialist and a Call Floor Worker Advanced Specialist for the past 8 years. She has worked 17 years with the State of Illinois. She is revered for her volunteer work, leadership ability, and role as a foster parent.

In the field of Child Welfare for approximately 16 years, **Keith Langston** currently serves as the Associate Deputy Director of Child Protection and Community Services. Always keeping children first, Mr. Langston has planned and organized community projects while partnering with other agencies.



AAAC Chairperson Michael Burns (left) and DCFS Director Bryan Samuels flank award recipient Debra Dyer.



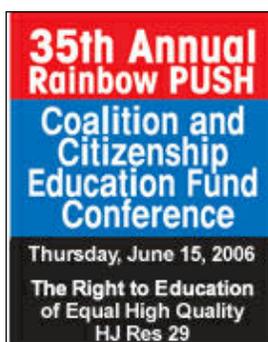
Burns (left) and DCFS Director Samuels join award recipient Tracy Barnes at the 14th annual AAAC conference.

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DCFS joins Rainbow PUSH at Educational Luncheon

On June 15, 2006, The Rainbow Push Coalition held an educational luncheon to acknowledge and support Black students, teachers and educational leaders. The luncheon was a key part of the Coalition's annual Chicago convention held during the week of June 12-16. The coalition and convention, a brainchild of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, brought together African American community leaders and city government officials to address issues pertinent to the Black community.

In support of the efforts of the Rainbow Push Coalition, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)



purchased a table at the stylish and informative luncheon. The agency, under the direction of Director Bryan Samuels, is a great supporter of education, reaching out to those who are demonstrative in this effort.

The attendees were excited to see the addition of the DCFS table. "It's good that they are involved," said one luncheon attendee. "They serve so many of our Black children. I'm glad they are putting forth some effort concerning these children's education."

Following the lunch break, Rev. Jackson, president and founder of the Rainbow Push Coalition, discussed the importance of events which cater to Blacks in education. Other key addresses came from the Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan, who vowed for better service and opportunities, and famed television Judge Greg Mathis. Mathis received a standing ovation when he pas-

sionately addressed President Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act" and the realities of the act on Black education.

For most attendees, the highlight of the Rainbow Push Coalition education luncheon came as students in attendance were honored with scholarships and awards. More than one hundred matriculating students were given generous scholarships of up to \$1,000 from the organization to assist in their pursuit of higher education.

The parents of these students filled the room with pride as the recipients' names were called. "That's my girl!" one father boomed as his daughter received her scholarship. "That's my brilliant girl!" DCFS representatives said they were elated to have participated in this special luncheon, which focused on highlighting the educational needs of minority youth and resolutions for those needs.

AAAC Award Recipients

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Charline Moron-McCuen has been with the State since 1990 where she began as an income maintenance specialist at Public Aid. Currently, she is a child welfare advanced specialist. Exemplary volunteer work coupled with expertise in her field, Moron-McCuen is an example of the dedicated welfare professional. She holds an MSW degree.

A motivated and selfless worker, **Stacie McKinney-**

Wallace has worked in the child welfare system for 13 years and is currently a child welfare specialist in program operations. Her work skills and professionalism make her an invaluable asset to the DCFS family.

Lucille Pearson has been employed with DCFS for almost 12 years. She currently serves as a community social service planner, working as part of a team representing the Department in the LAN 80 community. **Lucille**

is indeed a dedicated volunteer and respected professional.

Lynda Swan McClendon has been employed with DCFS since 1997 and currently works as child welfare advanced specialist. She is described as more than an "accumulation of titles, trainings, duties, or assignments. Mrs. Swan-McClendon embodies the very heart of what social workers aspire to be."

Delores Robinson Walton - at the time of the award ceremony - was the Associate Deputy of Community Relations (she has since left IDCFS, after 11 years of service). Staff at IDCFS described her as "exceptional" in the areas of her work performance and professionalism. While at IDCFS she successfully planned major public affairs events and was instrumental in obtaining donations from major corporations in support of youth in the care of IDCFS.



Uncovering the Office of Affirmative Action

The DCFS Office of Affirmative Action is the Department's division responsible for staff compliance relative to ethical issues. During a meeting in late June, Deputy Director of the Office of Affirmative Action Michael Holmes highlighted key goals and responsibilities of the office, which is dedicated to equality in the workplace.

Following the ratification of Civil Rights legislation, which prohibits discrimination in employment processes, DCFS established the Office of Affirmative Action in 1972. The office is committed to eliminating discrimination at all levels. It also serves DCFS employees by advocating for a non-discriminatory work place.

The Office of Affirmative Action is responsible for assuring that the agency is in compliance with civil rights rules and regulations. These regulations insure that the rights of all agency employees, applicants, clients and service providers are protected against unlawful discrimination including, but not limited to, race, color, religion, and sex.

The Department also provides

accommodations for those with physical or mental disabilities, provided that some accommodations do not cause undue harm. Other responsibilities of the office include counseling employees (whether their complaints are filed internally or externally) and providing monthly, quarterly and annual



Holmes

reports as well as disseminating information on AA/EEO.

If an employee feels that he or she has been sexually harassed or discriminated against because of race, color, sex, religion, age, etc., the employee has the right to file a charge with the Office of Affirmative Action, the Department of Human Rights or the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

According to Mr. Holmes, most complaints filed by black and Hispanic employees center around issues of retaliation. An increasing number of other complaints deal with discrimination

against sexual orientation. (A charge can be filed not only by DCFS employees, but also by an applicant for employment, a recipient of Department services, or any Department service provider or subcontractor.)

A charge can be initiated verbally or in writing, but it must be filed with the Illinois Department of Human Rights within 180 days of the alleged discriminatory act. "We receive about 2 to 3 (such) cases a month," Holmes said. "As of 2006, we've received 25 complaints." DCFS complaint forms are available through the Office of Affirmative Action.

After filing the complaint, the Office of Affirmative Action will conduct an internal investigation and make a recommendation within 30 working days as to whether there is substance to the charge and processing can continue. "What I stress about this office is neutrality. We try to remain as objective as possible."

For further information, contact the Office of Affirmative Action at 100 West Randolph, 6th floor, Chicago, Illinois 60601 (312-814-4692) or at 406 E. Monroe, Springfield, Illinois 62701 (217-524-1248).

A Knock At Midnight

Organization Teaches Life Skills

by Imani Josey

It was very refreshing listening to Johnny Banks, Sr., the executive director of the organization A Knock at Midnight, and Ida Brown, co-founder, talk about their organization. Arriving for interview with them earlier than the scheduled time, I did not have to wait long before Banks stuck his head in the room, extended his hand toward Brown and said, "Ask her anything you need to know. She knows as much as I do." Brown, with a short professional haircut and an impenetrable calmness, smiled and said, "Go ahead."

Her knowledge of the organization, as well as her assessments of the population she worked with, flowed from her like a river moving downhill, demonstrated her to be a woman who'd learned much during her years of service. According to Brown, A Knock at Midnight is a nonprofit organization specializing in teaching self-sufficiency and life skills for children and families in low-income areas.

The organization, founded in September of 2003, was the brainchild of Banks, a licensed minister, who needed a different organization after feeling that her ministry had "outgrown" the other service organizations with which she had supported. Named after a sermon of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the organization quickly grew from one operating from Brown's dining room table to its current 36,000 square foot facility in July of this year.

It was a move that came just in time, as Banks and Brown prepared to

celebrate the organization's third anniversary.

"Ms. Brown works with the girls and I work with the boys," Banks explained upon his return. "Only a man can teach a boy how to be one." The work that the two mentioned consists of a curriculum of life skills and the practical application of them. The team believes that the proper application of skills in their curriculum is what truly separates their organizations from others like it. Commenting straightforwardly, Brown insisted that it is a wonderful idea to teach life skills, but the process is a waste of time if the participants are not taught how

to apply them. "Life skills are more than a theory, oratory, or lecture," said Banks. Brown and Banks believe in preparing the participants to properly function in adult society in every way. They also encourage the involvement of the participant's parent or guardian so that these skills are not lost when the child returns home.

The life skill curriculum consists of lessons in a wide range of areas. One lesson may touch on self-esteem, communication skills, or taking personal responsibility for one's own life. Another lesson may consist of character development, substance-abuse prevention and time

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An instructor conducts a class for young students for "A Knock at Midnight", a nonprofit organization specializing in teaching self-sufficiency and life skills for children and families in low income areas.

Women, girls focus of 14th AAAC Conference

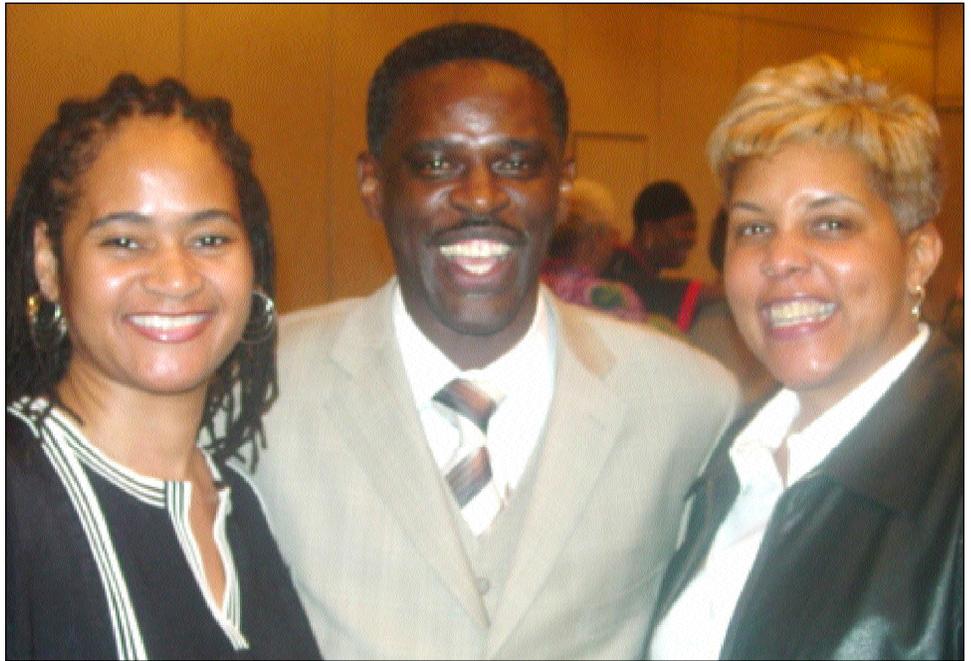
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Child Welfare Advanced Specialist Lynda Swan-McClendon and former Associate Deputy Director of Community Relations, Delores Walton-Robinson.

The two-day event also included theme-inspired workshops as well as keynote speakers who illustrated community concerns. The keynote speaker, Dr. David Omotoso Stovall, Assistant Professor of Policy Studies in the College of Education at the University of Illinois – Chicago, concentrated on the intersection of race, class, and gender in education. Stovall's dynamic presentation highlighted the underpinnings of urban minorities in education. Professor Stovall, whose speech was frequently interrupted by applause from the audience, enthusiastically told the audience, "We've chosen our rocks to stand on. You can die quick. Death is finite. It's more important that you live. And if you're living for something, what are you doing for it? Does it make you stand for justice in an unjust place?"

The conference also included workshops with some hard-hitting topics. Some of the titles included "Case Planning with Youth Regarding their Life Skills," "Case Management and Supervision with Families Affected by Substance Abuse of Alcohol and other Drugs," and "Service Planning with Families of Incarcerated Women: A Mother's Plight."

On the second day of the conference, Melissa Harris Lacewell, an assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, spoke on the African American woman and the challenges she faces in American society. (Her scholarly work focuses on African-American political thoughts on gender politics and race relations.) According to Professor Harris, "One of the constructions of Black womanhood is the notion of the strong Black woman. The idea here is that (what) the Black woman does at her best, what she essentially is, what she is capable of that no one else is capable of, is confronting everything."



Lauren Williams (from left), Rev. Walter Mathews and Jan Hooks at the recent AAAC 14th annual conference.

In addition to great speakers and informative workshops, the conference also featured wonderful entertainment. The first day of the conference ended with a skit, a parody on "The Oprah Winfrey Show", which was performed by DCFS staff and written and directed by PSA Bremen E. Campbell Sr. It depicted Ms. Winfrey learning about a young woman's journey through the child welfare system and her ultimate successes later in life. The participants included Lori Evans (as Shirley Jones, DCFS supervisor), Frances Elbert (Oprah Winfrey), Kimberly Harrell (Maya Angelou), Jeffrey Walker (Jamie Foxx), and Tracey Barns (Shaquita Ray, a former DCFS youth). Bremen Campbell (as Ludacris) and Walker closed the play. To the delight of the participants, background music for skit, lunch, and dinner, was provided by AAAC's very own-Chairman Michael Burns.

To close the conference, Letitia Evans, daughter of Lori Evans, performed a rendition of Alicia Key's "If I Ain't Got You". The Council appreciates Letitia's willingness to be a part of our cultural presentation and wish her the best. The

council stated it appreciates the help of all those who made the 14th Annual Conference a success, and urged DCFS staff to start planning to attend the 15th Annual Conference in 2007.

"One of the constructions of Black womanhood is the notion of the strong Black woman. The idea here is that (what) the Black woman does at her best, what she essentially is, what she is capable of that no one else is capable of, is confronting everything."

***Melissa Harris Lacewell,
Assistant Professor of
Political Science, University
of Chicago***

Organization teaching life skills

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management.

The program also goes beyond the classroom. For instance, not only do the participants learn to budget for grocery shopping, but Brown and Banks will also take them to the supermarket, teach them to discern the best products for purchase and show them how to prepare the meal itself.

The ultimate goal of A Knock at Midnight, according to Brown, is not only enriching the lives of youth, but also creating a community center. She mentioned that there are far fewer community centers in existence than in the past and the ones that are in existence make their services difficult to obtain. "Getting a YMCA membership can cost up to \$500," Brown elaborated. A

Knock at Midnight wants to establish a strong sense of community in African Americans that seemed commonplace in previous generations.

Standing upon the principles of restoration of love, faith, and hope, A Knock at Midnight specializes in taking interest in youth that are often overlooked. Going beyond the outlined obligations of employment, staff members have been known to receive late night calls from participants who are looking for a caring ear.

"These are our best leaders, thinker, geniuses," Banks said of his participants. "It's just a matter of will you do enough for them to trust you?"

For further information about this and other life skill programs available for IDCFS youth, please contact John Kasper at (312) 814-5959.

"Life skills are more than a theory, oratory, or lecture. ... These are our best leaders, thinker, geniuses. (It's just a matter of) will you do enough for them to trust you?"

Johnny Banks, Sr., the executive director A Knock at Midnight



Letitia Evans young singer entertains the audiences at the 14th Annual African American Advisory Council Conference. The conference was held in Naperville on April 20-21

From the Chairperson

Continued from page 4

providers in addition to Department contractual services for educational supports. Our Local Area Network (LAN) focus has completely changed to provide educational supports to youth. Also remember that it is essential that youth in care have a balance in their lives, just like youth from all walks of life.

Recreation and sport activities often help motivate children to do their best in school. Just recently, I had a conversation with former National Basketball Association player, Sonny Parker, about the ongoing basketball camps/programs that he has held for many years in his efforts to give back to the community. I asked him if there were any youth in foster care in any of his camps. He stated yes but only a few, and in those instances he had mentored the youth.

Sonny is well respected for his

work with youth, and I am certain that many of our young clients would greatly benefit from his programs. It is programs like these that are not expensive, and are located in the communities where our children live. We could use these supports in bringing about the educational outcomes that we want for our youth.

As mentioned by Sonny, in many instances organizers of these types of programs become concerned about the future of program participants and become their mentor.

I would like to thank Ms. Imani Josey for being the major contributor of this Newsletter. Special thanks to Deputy Director Arthur Bishop for allowing the Council the opportunity of having someone assist us this summer. So again, let's make every effort this year to give our youth the supports that will help them to have a balance in their lives. Peace.

Stellar intern cites lessons learned at DCFS

The African American Advisory Council (AAAC) had an intern this summer, Ms. Imani Josey. During her internship, she worked under the tutelage of Frances Elbert, who “was very happy to show Imani the real world of child welfare.” The entire membership of the AAAC is grateful for Imani’s help. She single-handedly researched and drafted the majority of the articles in this newsletter.

Imani is a rising junior at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she is concentrating on print journalism and African American Studies. She is a trustee scholar and recipient of the Sadie T. Yancy Scholarship provided by the Alpha Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (She maintains a grade point average of 3.5 out of a possible average of 4.0.) Imani also believes in staying active on Howard’s campus.

Her extracurricular activities include serving as the reigning 2006-2007 Miss Black and Gold for the Beta Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and fundraising co-chair of the

Howard University Bisonette Dance Ensemble. (During her membership, the Bisonettes became the first and only representatives of an HBCU at the University Cheer and All-Star Competition in Orlando, Florida.) She is also an active member of the Chicago People’s Union and the National Council of Negro Women.

Imani is a native of Chicago and graduated from the prestigious of Whitney Young Magnet High School in 2004.

In January 2005, Imani became a produced playwright when the Pegasus Players of Chicago selected her one-act play “Grace” for production during their annual citywide competition.

“Grace” details the life of the



Imani Josey

title character and explores the choices she makes as her desires for freedom conflict with her family’s desires for her success. Imani has also won three NAACPAct-SO Awards and a gold metal for playwriting by the Chicago West-Side branch.

Imani said she’s grateful for the opportunity to experience the inner workings of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS), particularly that of IDCFS’ African American Advisory Council.

According to her, her experiences this summer allowed her to open her eyes to the world and gave her a sense of compassion and understanding for children in the child welfare system.

She is grateful for the opportunity to observe IDCFS staff as they tackled difficult issues dealing with children on a daily basis.

She would personally like to thank Elbert for all of her wisdom and guidance during her Internship and AAAC Chairperson Michael Burns for affording her the opportunity to intern with the AAAC.

Book Review: ‘A Lesson Before Dying’

by Imani Josey

A Lesson Before Dying” details the lives of Grant and Jefferson, two young black men with lessons to learn about purpose before their literal and figurative deaths. Upon returning from his studies, university-educated Grant Wiggins finds it hard to reconnect to his beginnings in rural Bayonne, Louisiana. He now finds himself looking upon the people who once nurtured him with a lingering pity.

Grant sees their lives working the fields of bustling plantations as purposeless. Many had toiled the majority of their lives without having ever set foot in the living rooms of

the plantations for which they slaved. Grant’s pity eventually manifests itself into resentment as he scorns every aspect of rural life, down to the community’s unwavering religious beliefs. And as Grant

Book Review

blinds himself to the purpose in those around him, he loses sight of the purpose within himself.

Jefferson, a neighborhood youth, has not lost sight of his community and everything in it. It is the State of Louisiana, not the community, which causes him to lose his sense of hope and purpose.

One morning, after he

has been asked to accompany two friend on a car ride, Jefferson winds up the lone survivor of a botched liquor store robbery. The attempt and subsequent shoot-out, unfortunately, results in three deaths, including that of the white store owner. Though wrongfully convicted, Jefferson is summarily sentenced to death.

Grant and Jefferson’s destinies cross when Jefferson’s defense attorney utters one word in reference to his client: hog. Jefferson begins to use this word as the sum of his existence and loses himself in his own anger and fear. Jefferson subsequently refuses to do anything that is not befitting of an animal

including groom or speak. His grandmother, Miss Emma, is horrified by this behavior and requests that Grant, being the most educated Black man of the town, visit Jefferson and give him insight on manhood before he dies. Unfortunately, Grant’s personal hopelessness hinders his confidence in directing himself toward manhood, let alone a condemned man. He unenthusiastically complies.

Gaines, a master of saying without saying, threads his themes into the intricately woven plot. Through thoughtful characters and an endearing tone, “A Lesson Before Dying” paints the picture of two men at the brink of their existence.