

As Published in the Charlotte Observer
Editorial 'Viewpoint' February 26, 2008

Help break the cycle of poverty and violence

Everyday people in Charlotte can create meaningful change

Special to the Observer

I recently had breakfast with Ivan, a 26-year-old man who dropped out of high school at age 16. He lives with his girlfriend and their two children in a rented two-bedroom home with his sisters and an uncle. He smokes a pack of cigarettes per day and does odd jobs to earn money. He has a felony on his record -- selling crack cocaine when he was 18. He has been arrested many times for driving without a license.

Ivan has a 4-year old son, a 1-year old daughter and a baby that is due any day now.

What is the likelihood that Ivan will become a productive member of our Charlotte community? What are the chances of success for his three children? How predictable is it that Ivan will return to jail?

What is his responsibility in the matter? What is our community's responsibility?

We think and say things like "He should get off his butt and find a job," "He should be locked up" or "He has no excuse; he needs to pull himself up by the bootstraps like I did."

So I asked Ivan what he wanted from life, and I listened carefully to what he said. He said, "I want to show my kids a better life, and I want them to succeed." He said, "I have interviewed many times for a job and I can't get hired." Also, "I want to make my mom proud of me; she loved me and told me I could do better."

Then I asked, "Why did you drop out of school?" He said that when he was 16, his mom died and he felt like a part of him died. He had nowhere to turn, no reason to live, no hope. (His dad had died when he was 11.) He had tough times learning in school and was placed in special classes called BEH (Behaviorally Emotionally Handicapped) in junior high school.

Making a difference

Anyone who has been paying attention knows about the vicious poverty cycle in our community. It helps explain our high school dropout rate, our homeless population and our crime rate. So how do we support Ivan and his children? What can we do to help them to contribute and become part of Charlotte, and not just recipients of public assistance?

Fortunately, there is a lot we can do. Some of these suggestions address immediate issues, others underlying and systemic issues -- but they all involve taking action towards a solution.

Actions for immediate change:

- In our community there are thousands of potential mentors for folks like Ivan. It takes one person just one to two hours per week to help people who have lost their way. Call the Department of Social Services, Jacob's Ladder, Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America or another community agency and commit to one person. Agree to stick with them for a minimum of three years.
- Take a look at yourself, particularly remembering a time when you lost a family member, went through a divorce, or suffered a loss of some sort. What made the difference for you? How did you come through it? Offer that to someone who needs it.

- Get to know folks who are struggling. Invite them to share their story with you. See how you can be of service.

Actions for systemic change:

- Invest your money and political influence in issues that are prevention-based and research-proven.
- Create partnerships and alliances with people committed to long-term change.
- Approach people and situations with open-mindedness -- look for similarities between yourself and others.

Breaking the cycle

Before we shut down and think, "Don't have time. Not my problem," consider this:

Last week gunshots rang out in the driveway of an affluent suburb of south Charlotte. Three men walked brazenly into the living room of a family and demanded money from the wife and daughter of what was a happy, healthy family. This time, the victims happened to be friends of ours.

The criminals who entered their home didn't include Ivan, but in another time it could have. It could also be the fate of his baby boy several years from now if people like you and me don't intervene.

By appearances I am just another successful business owner and community member with a happy marriage and two healthy kids. But the truth is that I also had a very challenging childhood. If I hadn't had mentors, coaches, teachers and friends who made the decision to make a difference in my life when it counted, my life would undoubtedly look a lot different today.

By reaching out to me, each one of these people also made a commitment to confront their own cynicism. They dared to hope that they could make a difference. I'm living proof that they were right.

Observer community columnist Mike Whitehead of Charlotte is principal of Whitehead Associates Inc., a leadership and culture development consulting firm. Write him c/o The Observer, P.O. Box 30308, Charlotte, NC 28230-0308, or at
