

## IT IS THE HEART

CALVIN HELTON\*

I hail from South Philadelphia's Gray's Ferry section. I was born in 1954, and my father died two years later from a work-related accident. My mom never remarried. I missed my dad and often wondered what type of man he was. Some nights as a little boy I cried myself to sleep hurting for the father I'd never known.

In the early 1960's we were taken from my mother and placed in foster care with a family over on Jefferson Street in North Philly. Mr. & Mrs. Flowers, now deceased, were the only mom and dad we would know for the next eight or so years.

Living as foster children—and everyone knowing that was what we were—was rough. Our foster father never interacted with us in the way other neighborhood fathers did with their sons. I often ached for the closeness of a DAD.

I remember when my older brothers went on to junior high school. The loneliness got unbearable. But I could not cry, because “boys don't cry.” So I bore my hurt inside and kept quiet.

During my youth there was a strong street gang culture and I found myself immersed in the gang activity as a way to have the male bonding I ached for. And in fact, they became my family.

I would find myself doing things I normally would not. It was a way to fit in, to feel loved, to feel accepted by other males (mostly men) who were surrogate fathers to my peers and I on those mean streets. The hustler, pimp, street thug, old head gangster or dope dealer, all took part in my rite of passage into manhood.

For lack of better models, I dreamt of becoming like them—and needless to say, I did. In order to fit in I made life-changing sacrifices and serious choices.

Without positive male influences, I suffered many sexual inadequacies growing up. I confused intercourse with love, control with intimacy, spousal abuse with compassion. I grew up dysfunctional. It left me with anorexia of my body and soul. This might sound strange coming from a black man, who, like most black males, was raised in homes dominated by women.

But none of the women in my life held men accountable, so I had no positive archetypes.

From my early youth I found myself passing through one form of institution or another from Youth Study Center, Glen Mills School for Boys, White Hill (Camp Hill) Graterford, Rockview on the S.C.I. Cresson until October 23, 2011.

The men fate gave me to emulate, I believe, were the cause of my overall mindset and social development. However, this is not to say that I do not take full responsibility for my life choices. I knowingly made those choices, but at the time, I rationalized my reasons to offend.

As a native of Philly, born and raised, I feel that I'm very in tune with or connected to the pulse of this city—more so as a homeless citizen living off/on (literally) the streets. And as such, I would like to inform you, my fellow citizens, of a truth missed by most people in general.

There is a muscle in the human body that, if it is diseased or corrupted then the whole

---

\* Formerly published in One Step Away, Philadelphia's street newspaper produced and distributed by people experiencing homelessness.

body becomes diseased.

IT IS THE HEART.

Such disease of the heart gains hold to the extent that the owner of this heart comes to accept and believe the hype.

This diseased heart is the pulse now being felt flowing in the lifeblood of our city. This is the cause of the increased ongoing violence and killings raging through our communities. This is the cause of the lack of compassion for our fellow homeless citizens. This is the cause of our failing school system and the overall breakdown of families and communities. The heart of the City of Brotherly Love is diseased.

I, as the father of the late Calvin "C.J." Helton, Jr., who was one of seven victims of the infamous West Philadelphia "Lex Street Massacre" on December 28, 2000, am very much connected to the pulse of this city by virtue of my son's blood, crying through the "hood" along with the many others slain in this same senseless style of violence.

I have suffered much after the early and untimely demise of my son. I have yet to grieve for my last, due to the continued strain of day-to-day obstacles. Now I find myself caught up in this cycle of homelessness, and I believe it is a continuation of and a direct result of my loss of home after the Lex Street Massacre.

All I ask is a chance to be a productive citizen, a home that was promised me, and a second chance at life. After my return home from ten years of imprisonment, I was told to go to the RHD Ridge Ave. Men's Shelter, due to not having anywhere to live upon my return.

All I ask is to be allowed a chance to be productive and active in our community and within the work place. But to do that, we all need to call the appropriate city officials and hold them accountable for ending this cycle of returning citizens into homelessness.

We, the citizens of Philadelphia collectively can end homelessness if we raise our voices and bring this issue to the collective foresight of our city officials.