

URBAN FAMILIES IN CRISIS

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The problem, nature, and scope of “Urban Families In Crisis” is as broad, deep and varied as other crises that have confronted urban communities. While describing the problem may be complex, the solutions need not be as complex or daunting. I am reminded of a simple quote from Aristotle nearly 2,000 years ago that is still relevant today:

All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind realize that the fate of empires (nations) depends on the education of its youth.

The crisis in urban families cannot be considered without examining the role of quality education, the family structure and system, and the strength and vitality of the community in which families reside. These three systems are intrinsically connected and are central contributors to closing the opportunity gap, fostering social mobility, marginalizing the growing social and economic inequity, and achieving the American Dream.

These systems are in need of support, transformation and a return to fundamental values that are the glue that hold things together. Values are the principles and standards that we assess as good, right or desirable. They should be considered as what is in the best interest of our children. They guide our behavior, frame one’s belief system, shape our thinking and world view, and influence our actions.

Things have fallen apart in the absence of deeply rooted and grounded values that guide and mold family life, education and community values. We must confess, teach and self-actualize our values in the home, school and community. We value education and the role of education. Every child should have access to quality education from cradle to career, regardless of their ZIP code. We value early childhood education. The family is the child’s first educator and sets the foundation for others to continue. Research has indicated that what happens in early childhood and the environment in which children

live influences the developing brain and can matter for a lifetime. We value a family structure that has both parents in the household providing for the developmental needs of children and teaching and modeling love, understanding, pride, self-discipline, spirituality, healthy physical and moral habits, and academic skills and study habits.

The environment in which children live must communicate that children matter. There are two African proverbs to enhance our work that say, "I am because we are" and "It takes a village to raise a child." And it is unquestionable that strong, vibrant, caring, supportive and nurturing communities influence the developing child. A child's physical, emotional and social environment -- the actual neighborhood in which they live and those who reside in it -- may create the initial impression of their prospects for the future and their aspirations. The environment children experience must convey love, hope, inspiration, faith, security and safety.

The family system, education and the community are central contributors to accessing the promise of the American Dream. To achieve the American Dream, we must continue to create and sustain promising communities that support strong families, quality education for all children, value the proverb of "I am because we are," and commit individually and collectively to be "part of the solution and not part of the problem." **In The Spirit and Joy of Harambee!**