



# HARRISBURG & HARLEM

*Programs spotlight three local women hailed as Harlem Renaissance poets.*

BY M. DIANE MCCORMICK

*I pledge allegiance to the flag—  
They dragged him naked  
Through the muddy streets,  
A feeble-minded black boy!*

—“Flag Salute”  
by Esther Popel

*This pretty futile seam,  
It stifles me—God, must I sit and sew?*

—“I Sit and Sew”  
by Alice Dunbar-Nelson

*Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow’s mate,  
Keep all you have of queenliness,  
Forgetting that you once were slave,  
And let your full lips laugh at Fate!*

—“To a Dark Girl”  
by Gwendolyn Bennett

Esther Popel, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Gwendolyn Bennett were three major voices of the Harlem Renaissance—lost to time, in part, because those voices belonged to women.

All three poets had ties to Harrisburg. Now, 100 years later, Harrisburg artists, civic leaders and historians are educating a new generation of students who find inspiration in their stories.

In an age rededicated to equity, lessons about the artists of the Harlem Renaissance confirm the imperative of paths to opportunity and promise.

“With learning about yourself, about your culture, you are definitely able to propel your community and become your full self, knowing who you are and

being comfortable in your skin, being an African American,” said Courtney Brown, president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Epsilon Sigma Omega Chapter, Harrisburg, which is educating students about the Harlem Renaissance and the three poets. “This allows for that, to say you have forefathers who have been in poetry, art and dance, and you’re able to continue on that legacy and be glad in it.”

## ALICE, ESTHER, GWENDOLYN

Harrisburg. Harlem Renaissance. Safe to say, the two are rarely linked. Until now.

The Harlem Renaissance was the flowering of African American culture in the 1920s and ‘30s. The likes of Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey and Josephine Baker flourished amid a literary, musical, activist and intellectual environment devoted to creativity, free expression and Black empowerment.

In the years before the Harlem Renaissance, Harrisburg had its thriving 8th Ward, where African Americans joined a diverse mix of cultures and faiths to build homes, businesses and places of worship. By the 1920s, it was gone, demolished to make way for the expansion of the state Capitol grounds.

On the Capitol grounds, the Commonwealth Monument now commemorates the civic and economic vitality of the Old 8th. Among 100 names listed of the residents who gave the 8th Ward a place in history, three are poets whose voices battled injustice.

**Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935):** Author, poet, playwright, publisher, peace activist. Indefatigable suffragist whose 1915 speaking tour across Pennsylvania—including an audience of 1,000 at Harrisburg’s Wesley Union AME Zion Church—challenged men, in the words of one headline, “to Present Real Argument Why Women Should Not Vote.” Her poem, “I Sit and Sew,” seethes against an African American nurse’s only pathway to contributing to the World War I effort while men died “in that holocaust of hell, those fields of woe.”

**Harrisburg tie:** The marriage to her first husband, poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, fell apart amid his abuse and alcoholism. After his death in 1906, she married prominent Harrisburg publisher Robert Nelson and split her time between Harrisburg and Wilmington, Del.

**Esther Popel (1896-1958):** Poet, writer, educator, editor of African American periodicals. The academically gifted Popel (also known as Esther Popel Shaw) was the first Black woman to graduate from Dickinson College, which named the Popel Shaw Center for Race & Ethnicity in her honor. Popel’s searing “Flag Salute” juxtaposes lines from the “Pledge of Allegiance” with an account of a highly publicized Maryland lynching (“With Liberty—and Justice—They cut the rope in bits/ And passed them out/For souvenirs, among the men and boys!”).

**Harrisburg tie:** Born and raised, a graduate of Central High School.



Esther Popel

**Gwendolyn Bennett (1902-1981):** Poet, artist, commentator, a founder of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston conversed in the salons that Bennett hosted.

**Harrisburg tie:** Born in Louisiana but kidnapped by her father after her parents divorced, she grew up in the 8th Ward and excelled at Harrisburg schools.

As the Commonwealth Monument project accelerated, local historians and artists spotted the ties between the three women.

“These are really significant women,” said Messiah University Professor Jean Corey. “It’s not like Gwendolyn Bennett was a little bit of Harlem Renaissance. She helped start the Harlem Renaissance.”

The creative lights of the Harlem Renaissance, including Harrisburg’s contributors, form the centerpiece of an arts-education initiative meant to fill gaps in African American cultural history caused by cuts to the arts in schools, said Brown.

The service sorority’s in-school programs planned for this fall could culminate in performances that provide “opportunities for students to showcase their talents and maybe develop their gifts in a way that they didn’t realize their ancestors before them have already done here in America.”

“It’s not something new,” Brown said. “It’s something that they can continue.”

**"THIS HAPPENED HERE"**

For students, shining a light on women from Harrisburg who built national followings through uncompromising words inspires the realization that others have blazed a path, said Brown.

"They can be engaged in the arts in this way, and it gives them some commonality to say, 'I can lead from where I am because other people have done it,'" she said.

For girls, Brown added, the women offer "mentorship through history. They're seeing themselves, and they're also seeing that there's opportunity, especially when times arise again that you're looking at the difficulties of sexism in America. They're able to see that they can propel through those difficulties and obstacles and stand on top of their fields, be it athletics, be it science, be it entertainment."

Bennett and Popel definitively answer the question, "Can anything good come out of Harrisburg School District?" said Sharia Benn, founder, president and executive artistic director of Sankofa African American Theatre Company.

"This happened here," she said. "Esther would not have been what she became if she had not been here. I continue to be amazed. In the face of exclusion and adversity, she still rose. These women are phoenixes."

Give today's students the same access and opportunity, Benn added, and they, too, can develop "creative legacies of honor and legacies that honor our present, our past and will reflect our future."

**CONDUITS FOR EDUCATION**

Benn had a "wait a minute" epiphany while developing her play, "Voices of the Eighth." It was approaching 2020, a year of elections and census. Culling sources from the 100 Voices/Commonwealth Monument Project, she spotted the three poets and the parallels to our times.

"These women spoke to the importance of being counted," Benn said. "They addressed the importance, as a woman, of being seen as a valuable member and contributor to their society and to politics and to policymaking."

Benn wrote Bennett and Popel into "Voices of the Eighth" (a.k.a. "VOTE"), presented for students and audiences throughout the area. As a pandemic-year follow-up, Benn created a virtual presentation, "Do You Know Me?" featuring Dunbar-Nelson and her most famous poem, "I Sit and Sew." That presentation, with talkback and study guide, reached 2,500 students and teachers.

The women's poetry—including Bennett's powerful "To a Dark Girl"—enraptures students already accustomed to word slams and rap, said Benn.

"Being able to use those rhythms presented with words is engaging," Benn said. "They're hearing history that they've never heard before, never encountered before, didn't even think was possible."

Brown experienced the power of that connection with a group of St. Stephen's School boys, seemingly too cool to engage in a workshop with renowned poet Nikki Grimes. Then they used the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance to inspire their own raps, and they were all in.

"This was a way to showcase their talents, to show that music is not only rhythmic, but it's also a way to express yourself as a writer," Brown said.

In the coming year, Benn hopes to explore the characters more fully in a "VOTE Part Two," because their calls for human rights and dignity continue.

"It's sad but true," she said. "They're calling out for equality, for compassion, for justice and also to other African Americans, particularly women, to fight for freedom, to recognize the beauty that is in us as a people, to celebrate that. It's also an appeal to humanity to live and fight for the marginalized,

to recognize that an inclusive and respectful society is the most healthy and progressive and successful society." <sup>5</sup>

*For more information on Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Epsilon Sigma Omega Chapter, visit [www.akaepsilonsigmaomega.com](http://www.akaepsilonsigmaomega.com).*

*For more information on Sankofa African American Theatre Company, visit [www.sankofatheatrebbg.com](http://www.sankofatheatrebbg.com).*

*Images courtesy of Messiah University.*

*Scrapbooks by Alice Dunbar Nelson*

**FINAL SUFFRAGE MEETING TODAY**  
Mrs. Dunbar To Speak at Court House At 8 P. M.  
The final meeting of the Woman Suffrage campaign in York will be held in the Court House, Monday evening, when Mrs. Paul Lawrence Dunbar will speak under the auspices of the York County Committee of the Woman Suffrage Party.

heard and came in contact with her, and she is certain to have a large and enthusiastic audience on Monday evening.  
Dr. George W. Bowles will introduce the speaker, and Mrs. Ethel Armstrong will preside.

York Labor Nov 1, 1915 News.

**Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association**  
HEADQUARTERS: 201-205 ARCADE BUILDING, HARRISBURG, PA. TELEPHONES 2366-2367

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1921 GREEN ST., PHILADELPHIA

MARY E. BAKEWELL,  
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MRS. ROBERT K. YOUNG,  
68 WALK ST., WELLSBORO

WRITE STATE-FULL SUFFRAGE  
RELATED FEATHER-PARTIAL SUFFRAGE  
ILLUSTRATION-PAID PARTIAL SUFFRAGE  
DARK STATE-NON SUFFRAGE

Mrs. Paul Lawrence Dunbar.  
Mrs. Dunbar is the widow of the famous poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and is a teacher of English in the Colored High School at Wilmington, Del. She is a woman of rare beauty and charming personality, and a most forceful and eloquent speaker. On her previous appearance in York Mrs. Dunbar won the admiration and affection of all who

Monthly Total R



# THRIVING, STRIVING

*A new program  
brings together diverse  
congregations to dive deep  
into race, justice.*

BY SUSAN RYDER



Brian Smith & Drew Hart

There's an old saying that states, "The most segregated places in the world is church on Sunday morning."

So says Rev. Dr. David T. Miller, quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. Miller pastors Wesley Union AME Zion Church in Harrisburg, the oldest African American congregation in the city.

Recently, Miller and congregation representatives, along with 11 other churches, have begun participating in Messiah University's "Thriving Together" program.

The two-year program, funded by the Lilly Endowment, is bringing together diverse area congregations across geography, race and politics to participate in anti-racism training, learn about geographic racial boundaries, study theologies of justice and reconciliation, and examine their own tradition's mission and values.

Eventually, they will take a bus tour to areas of civil rights history in the South.

"At the end of our time, our participating congregations would have a deeper understanding of the ways that their own church participates in the racial ecosystem of our region, number one," said Drew Hart, Messiah professor and program co-director. "They would have a better understanding of their church, in their traditions' racial history. And they would have refreshed and reimagined their ministries to engage the challenges that we face in our current society today."

Each group has a particular hope for their congregation.

"My hope and my expectation is that we'll be able to deepen our roots in the community, but also work together with other congregations, around racial injustice, to become better advocates for the city and racial justice," said the Rev. Canon Kate Harrigan, rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Racial justice conversations, in the context of church, would also include discussing the hard truth that, throughout history, the church has played a significant role in promoting racial injustice.

"The Bible itself was used as a tool and weapon to enslave people, to define discrimination, to enforce laws, and to tell individuals that what we're doing, we're doing because this is what God would have us do," Miller said.

## RECONCILIATION, ACTION

The journey through this program will not be an easy one.

Congregations will talk openly about race, in a way that they may not have before and learn facts that they didn't know. These facts include:

- On the west shore, many neighborhoods had racially restricted deeds that limited the people who could buy a home based on race, religion or ethnicity.
- The KKK and other white supremacist groups have had a long history in Pennsylvania.
- At Wesley Union AME Zion, church property was simply taken from them, on two separate occasions, without any recourse or compensation.

"That part of this program is kind of reckoning with history," said Josiah Ludwick, associate pastor of Harrisburg First Church of the Brethren on Hummel Street. "Having experts and people who've done the scholarship in those areas to help guide us through that process is really exciting."

Talking and learning is just one aspect of the program. The second involves reconciliation and action.

"We need to be about the work of reconciling broken relationships in our world," said Brian Smith, program co-director. "And part of that is, of course, dealing with the history and legacy of racial inequalities in this country."

Each participating congregation will receive a small grant at the end of the two years to develop or revitalize racial justice initiatives, Smith said.

Thirty churches applied for the program, more than double what the program could manage and many others expressed interest.

Hart and Smith both believe that the murder of George Floyd last year demonstrated to congregations a problem they could no longer ignore, heightening interest in the program.

"That just affirmed for us two things: the validity of our program and the good work that people are already doing," Smith said. "It demonstrated that this is a thing that churches already have in their frame."

## CALLING US

Racism can be viewed as a political topic, and some churches shy away from tackling the issue.

"If churches, in particular, are going to say that they're committed to the God revealed in scripture, then that's the same God that says to let justice roll down like waters and righteous, like an ever flowing stream, right?" Hart said. "And so still, that's the kind of work we should be about as Christians."

Other churches dive right into what they consider their work, Harrigan said.

"There's a very tenuous line between political and mission," she said. "And I think we, you know, the world walked on that line last year. And, for some, anything that had to do with Black Lives Matters or George Floyd was too political for church. St. Paul's, we think of that as church. That's what God is calling us to respond to."

According to Miller, rather than churches staying away from controversy, they are uniquely situated to create the kind of reconciliation that is promoted through the "Thriving Together" program. He said that he's looking forward to another, better time.

"When both parties, whether you're black or white, say, 'I'm sorry. I was really ignorant to that. I never looked at it that way,'" he said. "And have an understanding of other pieces, learning one another's culture."

Rather than segregated from one another, churches connecting in "Thriving Together" will discuss hard issues and will likely feel uncomfortable and challenged.

"I think the church in general is on a precipice, and we can go either way in that precipice," Harrigan said. "We can either kind of tumble back and fall into being a very ineffective institution. Or we can strive forward. We can become one of the most effective institutions, not imposing our theology or belief system so much as encouraging justice, equity, love and hope." **B**

For more information on "Thriving Together," visit [www.messiah.edu/info/23582/thriving\\_together](http://www.messiah.edu/info/23582/thriving_together).

# MAMA'S BOYS

*Documentary tells the stories of young lives lost to gun violence in Harrisburg, through the words of their mothers.*

BY MADDIE GITTENS

It was 2014 when Harrisburg-area resident Shanelle Baltimore received a panicked call from her youngest son, who screamed on the other end that someone had been shot.

Over seven years later, Baltimore can still recall every detail of that night. She remembers the conversations leading up to the shooting, the exact times she made phone calls to relatives, and the waiting room at the hospital, flooded with friends and family.

But of course she remembered everything—it was the night her firstborn son died. Every morning since, Baltimore kisses a framed picture of Hauson Baltimore-Greene Jr., better known as “Choppy,” the nickname the family gave him after his dad, “Big Chops.” There are reminders of him everywhere, she said. The family celebrates Hauson’s birthday in November and the day that he passed, Jan. 18, every year. Conversations about Hauson will trigger laughter and tears, but are largely kept between family members and close friends.

When Hauson’s cousin, Lawrence Greene, approached her about sharing her story for a documentary he was making, Baltimore was not interested. It would be too painful, and she didn’t know if she was ready to share his story with the world, even years later. When Greene asked again, she considered it and decided to give it a try—for Hauson.

As soon as she walked into the filming room, she was surrounded by other Harrisburg mothers who had lost sons to gun violence. It was like being at a family reunion, she explained.

“I felt like no one understood my pain and anger,” she said. “But being in a room of other mothers who went through the same thing brought comfort to my heart. I felt like this is something I had to do.”

## TELLING THEIR STORIES

Greene, of Eli Greene Films, expects to release his film, “Our Boys,” late this summer. It’ll be the second documentary he has produced, this one building off of the last.

His first film, “Torin,” followed the life and death of Middletown high school student Torin Dworchak who was bullied and eventually shot and killed.

After seeing the effect the film had, impacting the community and raising over \$20,000 for anti-bullying charities, Greene wanted to continue the story—this time in his hometown.

“I feel like maybe this is what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said. “This happens to so many people in Harrisburg. Their stories have to be told.”

Greene reached out to a few mothers he knew who had sons who were lost to gun violence in the city. But word spread and, soon enough, Greene had a room full of mothers and family members sharing the stories of their sons, brothers, grandsons and friends.

Like Baltimore, many of these mothers hadn’t talked much about their sons’ stories—it was painful. Sharing their experiences on camera was definitely not easy—Greene could tell. They often had to take breaks from filming.

“I was very emotional,” Baltimore said. “But this was something I had to do. This isn’t about me; it’s about my child and other young people in our community.”

In addition to Baltimore, four other mothers shared the stories of their sons who were killed by gun violence. This includes Jowanna Howze, the mother of Jawan Washington; Cheryl Hughes, the mother of Malik Mundy and Charles Tate Jr.; Shawanna Plummer, the mother of TyJerrell Curry; and Monica Gallmon-Hill, the mother of Rashaad Gatt.

Grandmother Sandra Jackson also tells her grandson, Chay’nce King-Henderson’s, story, and Fla Richardson shares her older brother, Anthony Richardson Jr.’s, story. Rep. Patty Kim (D-103) also makes an appearance to tell Jason Hill’s story, as it was still too painful for his mother to be interviewed.



Young men featured in “Our Boys.”

Throughout the documentary, viewers get to know the young men through archive video footage, as well as through their mothers’ and family members’ testimonies. There are smiles and happy memories, but there’s also grief and tears. It’s a film that will likely weigh heavily on its audience. But that’s part of Greene’s reasons for making it. He wants people to sit with that sadness and weight, to see a perspective that they might not have before.

“The city has to see the pain that these mothers are going through,” he said. “My goal is healing, not just for the mothers, but for the whole community.”

## GRIEF & RELIEF

To Greene, “Our Boys” is more than a project; it’s personal. He knows several of the mothers in the film. It was tough for him at times, too, listening to the mothers pour out their hearts, which were broken for their sons.

“I always try to make sure everyone feels comfortable,” he said. “It was hard for a lot of them. It was very emotional for me, too.”

Baltimore had to work through the feelings of grief that had stuck around since 2014. And then there were the anger and trust issues she had. She didn’t even have the comfort of justice to hang on to. Hauson’s killer was never found.

Hauson was in high school when he passed. Baltimore never got to see him go to prom, graduate or choose a college.

Releasing her story, sharing her son with the world—it was scary. But it was healing, too.

“It gave me a sense of relief,” she said. “The grieving process never goes away, but he’s definitely here in our hearts.”

Greene hopes the film will help other mothers process their pain and heal. And for those who don’t share the same story of loss, Greene hopes it will give them a new perspective.

“I really hope everyone watches this film,” he said. “The stories that you’re going to hear are life changing.”

For more information about “Our Boys” or to watch the trailer, visit [www.eligreenefilms.com](http://www.eligreenefilms.com).

# STYLE TO DYE FOR

*Kids In Color makes a family business out of tie-dyeing one-of-a-kind pieces.*

BY MADDIE GITTENS

**R**aina Yates never considered herself an artsy person. But when she saw someone wearing a cool tie-dyed shirt, she thought, “I could do that.”

Raina bought a craft store tie-dye kit and gave it a shot. That’s when she knew she had found something she loved.

“I tie-dyed everything I could get my hands on,” she said.

Soon, her whole family was involved. Her husband Quincey began watching YouTube videos on tie-dyeing during his breaks at work. And, of course, they got their boys, Cameron, 8, and Julian, 4, in on the action.

“We think it’s the coolest thing—art you can wear,” Raina said.

About two years ago, the family started Kids In Color, a custom tie-dye streetwear business. Since then, they’ve sold their colorful shirts, hats and hoodies all over the city at festivals and pop-ups like the HBG Flea and Small Business Saturday.

Customers have a few options when it comes to getting their hands on a Kids In Color piece. They can purchase clothing that has already been hand-dyed or they can request custom pieces, choosing the colors and style they prefer. People can even bring in their own items, even stained shirts, to be revamped with tie-dye. Kids In Color especially loves upcycling thrifted and vintage clothing, Raina said.

One thing is for sure—whatever you get, it will be one of a kind.

For Raina, creating a unique work of art means splattering, dripping and squirting dye, mostly at random. It’s like therapy for her, she said.

“I try to incorporate what I’m feeling into it,” she said. “I try to put a piece of myself into my art.”

Quincey is often more methodical—scrunching, twisting, folding and rubber-banding shirts to create unique patterns.

The basement of the Yates’ home has become a tie-dye workshop, the kids helping with pieces too. Cameron’s been known to go to school with color-stained fingers, Quincey said.

“The reason this has worked and lasted for us is because we can all do it together,” Raina said.

The positive family aspect of the business is part of why Andrea Grove, owner of Elementary Coffee Co., loves working with Kids In Color.



*The Yates family*



*T-shirts at Elementary Coffee Co.*

For the past year, Kids In Color has dyed and bleached Elementary’s logo T-shirts.

“People love the tie-dye and the fact that they’re all distinctly different,” Grove said. “It’s been really tough to keep them in stock.”

She added that Raina and Quincey are some of the most passionate people she has ever met and that it’s been wonderful partnering with another small Harrisburg business.

“They would have to decide they didn’t want to tie-dye anymore for us to not work with them,” Grove said.

But according to Raina, she doesn’t see that happening anytime soon.

“Even if I never sold another piece, I would probably still keep tie-dyeing,” she said.

In addition to pop-up shops, Kids In Color has attended events and visited schools to hold workshops for kids on tie-dyeing. They also teach kids about entrepreneurship and making money through art. It’s

a huge part of their mission—introducing kids to an art form that allows them to express themselves. They teach them a lesson they learned themselves—that art is more than just drawing or painting.

This all ties into the name of their business: Kids In Color. It’s a nod to their boys, who they refer to as the face of their brand, but it also refers to the childlike creativity that tie-dyeing requires.

“It’s that freedom of when you weren’t afraid to express yourself in whatever way feels right,” Quincey said. **B**

*To purchase or view Kids In Color’s custom tie-dyed pieces, visit [www.shopkidsinc.com](http://www.shopkidsinc.com). For more information on upcoming pop-up sales, find them on Facebook. Photos courtesy of Cody Rager.*

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## GIFTS FOR GRANDMA

*Harrisburg group assists, uplifts those raising their grandchildren.*

BY SUSAN RYDER

Seven years ago, Maryann Yeater and her husband took custody of their now-9-year-old granddaughter.

“We’re glad we did what we did,” she said. “It may have changed our lives, but it was right to do.”

Yeater is one of many Harrisburg-area grandparents who have found themselves in the position of raising their grandchildren. Fortunately, they don’t have to do so alone or in isolation.

For help, they can count on Delorez Cobb-Jones and the organization she founded in 2013, Grandparents Involved from the Start (GIFTS).

“I was a teacher and school principal, and I had many meetings with grandparents raising their grandchildren,” Cobb-Jones said. “So, I thought that it would be helpful to design a program to provide support to them.”

Cobb-Jones said that GIFTS provides information on the “day-to-day operations of raising a child.” The organization offers informational meetings, support through the Grandparents Information Forum and advice on helpful resources. Experts share information on topics such as homeschooling, voting, mental health and finances.

“If she can’t help you, she knows the person to send you to,” said Cynthia Crystal, who has raised her 12-year-old granddaughter from birth.

According to Cobb-Jones, grandparents raising their grandchildren face challenges in three areas: self-care, guardianship and finances.

Grandparents, often on fixed incomes, may need to put off retirement. At 64 years old, Crystal found herself in this situation.

“I thought I deserved to be home, but my pocketbook didn’t say that,” she said, with a laugh.

GIFTS helps families with weekly fruit and vegetable distributions at the Neighborhood Center on N. 3rd Street in Harrisburg and through grocery gift cards, Christmas gift distributions and more.

Even families that are financially secure may experience the physical and emotional strains of raising a grandchild. But grandparents often push through and neglect their own physical and emotional wellbeing, Cobb-Jones said.

“They say, ‘I’m just gonna do what I have to do,’” she said.

But knowing that they aren’t isolated in the journey is helpful.

“I didn’t realize until I got into the program how many grandparents are raising their grandchildren today,” Yeats said.

### BEST FOOT FORWARD

One challenge often faced by grandparents is education, including the dreaded homework assignment.

Both Crystal and Yeats described homework as challenging and stressful—especially math. In response, GIFTS invited a teacher to help grandparents understand today’s math, which is not what Crystal described as the simpler math of her generation.

As a former educator, Cobb-Jones is especially helpful with educational concerns. Crystal said that her granddaughter experienced racial slurs at school and that Cobb-Jones guided her through that situation.

Another significant concern for grandparents is guardianship.

Cobb-Jones said that many grandparents don’t have legal custody of their grandchildren. To families, it seems simpler to keep the system out of the process, and seeking guardianship or adoption is costly.

“Eventually, the parent has to waive their rights,” said Cobb-Jones. “And, in some cases, depending on the relationship that the parent has with their mother or father or grandparent, it can be difficult.”

Not having custody places both the grandparents and child in a precarious and complicated position, especially when it comes time to register for school or apply for some type of assistance. While GIFTS doesn’t offer legal advice, it can direct people where to go and act as a sounding board for overwhelmed grandparents.

Even in their struggles, both Yeats and Crystal carry themselves with the quiet acceptance that their life’s mission changed when their grandchildren entered their homes.

“The bottom line is, if we didn’t take her, she would be in foster care, and we didn’t want that because she is our granddaughter,” Yeats said.

Crystal soldiers on, as well.

“Can’t waste energy on something you can’t change,” she said. “Put your best foot forward.”

### HELP OUT THERE

About 100 grandparents are involved in GIFTS, and they experience a wide range of emotions, Cobb-Jones said. Some experience anger, and ask themselves, “Why?” she said.

Trauma frames some of these situations—trauma for both the child and the grandparent. In one instance, grandparents had to care for their grandchildren after their father killed their mother—the grandparent’s daughter.

GIFTS is present for these parents, to listen and guide.

The organization’s funding comes from some grants, but primarily through a fashion show, which was sidelined last year due to the pandemic.

Fortunately, GIFTS recently received the MLK Peace Project award, which will provide professional development and a holiday collection. And, recently, GIFTS received funds from a Dauphin County local share gaming grant for “GrandPads,” a user-friendly iPad with larger text for aging eyes.

There are many ways to help those raising their grandchildren, though some grandparents are reluctant to reach out.

“There’s help out there,” Crystal said. “You just have to ask for it.”

Cobb-Jones suggested that relatives of those raising grandkids should gather and talk about how they can help. Those ways include simply offering help, taking a meal or picking up the child from school.

“You know, give the grandparent a break, to go get their nails done,” said Cobb-Jones.

Even with help, the life-changing challenges of caring for grandchildren can’t be denied. For those who accept the challenge, they have the support of GIFTS and advice from folks like Crystal.

“Be strong, hang in there,” she said. “No time for a pity party.” **E**

*To learn more about GIFTS, visit [www.giftsgivelife.com](http://www.giftsgivelife.com).*