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Opinion

Frank Denton: How to turn criminals into taxpayers

By Frank Denton
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"At its heart," President Barack Obama said last month, "America is a nation of second chances."

Obama made the remark as he released 46 federal drug offenders who had been given sentences disproportionate to their crimes during our national anti-crime frenzy over the past two or three decades.

You remember. At every political level, politicians curried favor with nervous electorates by one-upping each other in being "tough on crime" and passing laws that put more people in prison and for longer terms, often for relatively minor offenses. Since the mid-1990s, the U.S. prison population has doubled, to 1.6 million people. We have 5 percent of the population but 25 percent of the prisoners - the highest incarceration rate in the world.

"America has a rap sheet," The Wall Street Journal reported last year. "Over the past 20 years, authorities have made more than a quarter of a billion arrests. ... As a result, the FBI currently has 77.7 million individuals on file in its master criminal database - or nearly one out of every three American adults. Between 10,000 and 12,000 new names are added each day."

We're paying huge prices for our simplistic policy of locking 'em up and throwing away the key. The New York Times last April found that the massive imprisonment has stripped urban black neighborhoods of hundreds of thousands of their young men. "More than one out of every six black men who today should be between 25 and 54 years old have disappeared from daily life ... leaving many communities without enough men to be fathers and husbands."

Florida's prison population has increased more than 400 percent over the past 25 years, from 19,692 inmates to 100,942, and the state Department of Corrections has grown to be one of the largest state agencies, with an annual budget of $2.3 billion (compared to $164.5 million in 1980).

Each inmate costs us about $20,000 a year. "We spend more general revenue on Corrections and Juvenile Justice than we do the State University System," says the Project on Accountable Justice at Florida State University.

The realization of the exploding human and financial costs is causing the nation to begin to sober up from its binge. Congress has been building momentum to scale back some of the tough sentencing laws that have overcrowded federal prisons. Other reforms are trying to take root in Tallahassee.

We're beginning to understand the ongoing and long-term implications of our intensely punitive - as opposed to rehabilitative - criminal justice system.

The Florida Smart Justice Alliance says that only 23 percent of the 33,000 inmates released this year had gotten treatment: "The warehousing of inmates has created a generation of prisoners whose time behind bars has only taught them how to be better criminals."

You and I would like to suppose that, while we have this captive audience with certified personal deficits, we would try to prevent future social and financial costs by treating, training and educating them to become more law-abiding, productive and self-supporting citizens when they re-enter society.

Remarkably and tragically, that is not the case. Only 3 percent of the Department of Corrections budget goes to "Education and Programs." The average amount spent on education services was $1.01 per inmate per day.

The average inmate goes to prison with a sixth-grade education, and if he or she can't read any better than that, 150 hours of literacy courses are mandatory. But GED courses are not even available until the inmate is within three years of release. College courses are out of the question, unless provided by correspondence and paid by someone else.

Because the Legislature cut funding, the prisons started using "inmate teaching assistants," working under certified teachers, to reach as many inmates as possible.

Last year, out of 109,942 inmates, only 17,751 took basic education courses, and another 4,716 took vocational courses. There were 2,010 GEDs, 92 high school diplomas and 1,798 vocational certificates awarded.

What most inmates leave prison with is $50, a change of clothes and a bus ticket back to where they were sentenced, with no more job or life skills and a criminal record that diminishes prospects of finding a job. The Project on Accountable Justice says 64 percent of them will be rearrested within three years, and 30 percent will return to prison.

America believes in second chances - and we're also supposed to believe in a hand up, especially when it's in our self-interest.

The RAND Corporation in 2014 analyzed 267 studies and concluded that inmates who participated in prison education programs have "43 percent lower odds of recidivating than inmates who did not," and the odds of getting a job after release were 13 percent higher for those who attended class in prison.

That study estimated that every dollar invested in prison education could save up to $5 on three-year re-incarceration costs.

Julie L. Jones, secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections, agreed in an op-ed for the South Florida Sun Sentinel: "For too long, the department has operated in a way that focused more on managing the time spent in our facilities, than on preparing inmates for the day they return to their community. That incarceration model simply does not work.

"Today, the department is embracing a new methodology that focuses on transformative rehabilitation. We believe that transformative rehabilitation, and subsequently less crime, begins on the first day of incarceration," with an individualized plan for every inmate.

"Institutional programs ranging from substance abuse treatment and counseling to educational and vocational classes are essential to keeping an inmate on the right track and ensuring that their incarceration creates positive change in their

lives. Providing our inmates with an opportunity to leave our facilities with the skills, certifications and education needed to help them successfully re-integrate into our communities is critical to reducing the rate at which offenders re-engage in criminal behavior."

McKinley Lewis, Corrections' communications director, acknowledges that will require investment, presumably involving the Legislature. "It's an idea, the way we would like to move forward," he said. "Then we'll create a strategic plan. We're going to do this the right way."

Meanwhile in Jacksonville, Operation New Hope's Ready4Work program is trying to help many newly released inmates get a grip on life - and a job. President and CEO Kevin Gay said only about 22-23 percent of incoming clients have a high school diploma or GED. "One of the biggest hurdles we face is folks coming out with nothing. What we're dealing with here is not a morality issue; it's a poverty issue.

"We've got a lot of broken people who've never had any success. If all you've seen around you is no one will hire you, then you wonder why would you want to get an education? Hope is a job, and they've never seen it. They're coming back to the poorest communities in town, where there are no jobs."

But suddenly jobs can materialize - after the client goes through Ready4Work's intense program of life-coaching, job training and job placement assistance.

Michael O'Leary, CEO of the Grimes Cos., one of Jacksonville's oldest and largest locally owned logistics companies, said he's hired more than 150 ex-inmates over the past three years and could use more - but only if they've been through Gay's Ready4Work program.

"With the folks that we brought in from Operation New Hope, turnover dropped 80 percent," he said. "It was remarkable. Productivity increased dramatically, because we're not constantly retraining, and the people who are there really want the jobs."

O'Leary sees "huge, huge potential to bring some value to that incarceration period by helping these folks get the job skills training they need, so long as it's coupled with the life skills coaching and the mentoring in the form and fashion Operation New Hope does."

Gay thinks the idea of "transformative rehabilitation" of prison inmates can address the issues of crime and poverty at the same time by taking advantage of the "captive audience" in prison who now are killing time watching TV or lifting weights but could be in a classroom learning how to be productive citizens.

"Poverty is the great incubator for crime," he said, "and the best process by far is to get as much education and job training behind the walls as we can.

"I can tell you this without a doubt: If we can get people the skills they need, we've got tons, hundreds of companies that would be willing to hire them. I got a job order for 60 people, and I could fill only two of them."

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Opinion

Frank Denton: How to save at-risk children

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Of course you'd always help a little kid who needs it. You'd even help his or her parent who just needs some advice or help - if you knew it really would make a difference.

But the problem with all those social programs to help poor people get a foothold out of poverty is that they seem to be just a bunch of acronym agencies with fuzzy purposes and big public budgets that pour tax dollars down holes that never seem to fill.

Just more government waste on people who may be hopeless anyway.

So the answer to the parent of the little kid is to pull yourself out of it, or our elaborate criminal justice system will lock up your child forever if he doesn't figure out for himself how to stay in school and out of trouble.

Show me anything else that works.

OK.

Experts with a lot of data can show you that certain help in the early months of a child's life can change the course of an entire life. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.

"A growing body of evidence shows that a few model social programs - home visits to vulnerable families, K-12 education, pregnancy prevention, community college and employment training - produce solid impacts that can last for many years," Ron Haskins wrote in The New York Times.

Haskins, a Republican policy analyst who advised President George W. Bush, is now co-director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution and co-author of "Show Me the Evidence: Obama's fight for Rigor and Results in Social Policy."

"Historically," he wrote, "Democrats have been criticized for throwing money at intractable problems, while Republicans have been depicted as heartlessly assuming that social spending never works. The truth is, of course, more complex."

Haskins wrote that some of those programs have been expanded "because the Obama administration, building on work by the Bush administration, has insisted that money for evidence-based initiatives go primarily to programs with rigorous evidence of success, as measured by scientifically designed evaluation."

As we have reported, there is considerable momentum, at the federal and state levels, for greater emphasis on early education, starting with child care, preschool and school readiness, but the emphasis needs to start even earlier, before birth, certainly before the twig is bent.

Columnist Nicholas Kristof pointed to a major new study from Stanford University showing that achievement gaps for poor kids begin as early as 18 months. "Then at 2 years old, there's a six-month achievement gap. By age 5, it can be a two-year gap. Poor kids start so far behind when school begins that they never catch up - especially because they regress each summer.

"One problem is straightforward. Poorer kids are more likely to have a single teenage mom who is stressed out, who was herself raised in an authoritarian style that she mimics, and who doesn't chatter much with the child.

"Yet help these parents, and they do much better. Some of the most astonishing research in poverty-fighting methods comes from the success of programs to coach at-risk parents . ... The earliest interventions, and maybe the most important, are home visitation programs like Nurse-Family Partnership. ... These interventions are cheap and end at age 2. Yet, in randomized controlled trials, the gold standard of evaluation, there was a 59 percent reduction in child arrests at age 15 among those who had gone through the program."

You can imagine that those 59 percent of kids who are not arrested are also more likely headed for tax-paying jobs than tax-eating prisons.

Miami-Dade took a leap of faith that investing early will save in the long term. Its property taxpayers pay an average of about $45 a year - a half mill - to fund their Children's Trust, generating more than $100 million for children's

programs, including $8.5 million for parenting and home-visiting programs.

Parents of the 30,000 births in Miami-Dade each year are offered help starting with prenatal care and then, at the hospital, information packets about parenting and child development - and an offer of free home visits by "family coaches" who can help the new parent learn how to be a good and effective parent.

"It's not a complex intervention," said Peter Gorski, chief health and child development officer for the Trust, "but the timing is so sensitive in the life of a family that it can make a difference beyond its simplicity. There is no other transition in life that is so fragile in every sense. None of us feels confident at that moment of birth that we can do it, that we have answers to the questions or even know the questions. So it's a great time to be involved."

Gorski said the Trust-funded parent support and education programs served 3,696 parents with 6,619 children last year, and 93 percent of them said they increased their knowledge of parenting and child development, 88 percent said they improved their skills and relationships with their children, and 95 percent reported decreased stress or increased social support.

As you have read in recent Times-Union stories, we have some efforts here. The Healthy Start Coalition tries to do a health risk assessment on pregnant women during a prenatal medical appointment, then offers high-risk, first-time mothers intensive case management and home visits until the baby turns 2.

Healthy Families Jacksonville uses the same assessment to offer at-risk families coaching to prevent child abuse.

Statewide, it claims 98 percent of children were free from abuse and neglect after one year and 95 percent after three years - at an average cost of $1,900 compared to the estimated $72,709 to deal with the consequences of child abuse.

"If a 2-year-old throws a temper tantrum, we know it's normal development," said Mary Nash, program manager of Healthy Families. "But some parents might think it's being bad, and if there's high stress in the home anyway, the risk for abuse goes up."

While programs are aimed more at reducing infant mortality and child abuse, parent coaching and home visits can have positive effects on overall child development and later school success. "It all ties together," Nash said.

Home visiting, said Susan Main, president and CEO of the Early Learning Coalition, "is a wonderful opportunity for families to have a mentor, so to speak, this person they trust to come into their home, they develop a relationship with, to help develop their parenting skills, help the bonding experience between the mother and father and the child. They've got to want us, they've got to trust us, they've got to let us come into their homes. Most do, once they understand this is going to help their families."

Think about it: Do you think any parent of a little kid, no matter how poor or alienated or disfranchised, *wants* to be a bad parent?

"If we could take it to scale," Main said, "it's an incredible opportunity for our community. Home visiting is costly, but it's not expensive in the great scheme of things. The ROI [return on investment] is incredible. It's been shown time and time again that, if we invest in these families, that will pay us dividends all the way to graduation.

"If you look at it as a long-term investment, it's absolutely the best way for us to ensure that these children succeed in school and life, not get pregnant as teenagers, not go into crime, but go to college. All the research is there."

She pointed to a 40-year research project which found that "investing $1 in a child's success early on saves $17 down the road, with tangible results measured in lower crime, fewer single parents and higher individual earnings and education levels." Other longitudinal studies, she said, show that investing in early learning means less spending on special education, welfare and juvenile and criminal justice.

Back up three paragraphs: "If we could take it to scale ..." There's the issue, the challenge that requires a leap of faith by community leaders and taxpayers.

Main says the parenting and home-visit programs are reaching a small minority of the families that need them. "We're not reaching a fourth of them, I don't think. We need to quadruple it, yes, probably quadruple it."

She didn't have an estimate of what that would cost. But subtract some zeroes from what we're paying now to palliate our urban pathology of social failure - police, security systems, insurance, trauma care, jails, courts and prisons. Not to mention lost lives.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Getting inside our murder rate

By Frank Denton

Posted Feb 5, 2016 at 6:51 PM

Two dead babies, one there, one here, both victims of evil - and of public apathy, or maybe just acceptance.

The first was Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian boy whose body, still wearing his tiny, Velcro sneakers, washed up on a Turkish beach. His family and 12 other people desperately fleeing the Syrian civil war had jammed onto a small, flimsy, inflatable boat trying to get to the Greek island of Kos. It capsized.

Photos of Alan's body lying face-down on the beach, waves lapping his head, caused international heartbreak and outrage as a symbol of the humanitarian disaster, with more than 250,000 people killed and more than 11 million forced from their homes, 4.5 million of them fleeing Syria in hopes of reaching safety somewhere.

Alan's very short life could have been the impetus for peace talks, but they have been suspended as the many and complex militaries blame each other and intensify the violence and killing. The civilized world watches but seems unable to turn its heartbreak into action.

Now there is the other dead baby, this one last week in our town, one of our children: Aiden Michael McClendon, whose second birthday would have been March 14.

Last week, unknown gunmen, gang members according to the police, attacked a house on the Eastside with a variety of weapons, some semi-automatic, spraying about 20 shots into a house and, for no apparent reason, into a parked car containing innocent bystanders - Aiden and his mother and grandmother.

The 22-month-old was struck at least three times in his upper body and died later that night at UF Health Jacksonville.

He was one of 14 people to die of homicide in Jacksonville in January, but before you tsk-tsk, shake your head and turn the page, let me tell you a little about Aiden.

"He was a real boy," said his aunt, Larhonda Fleming, whom he called "Teetee," because of the last syllable of "auntie." "He liked running and all that. When I worked out, he'd work out with me. He could be kind of rough - he used to rough up his older brother," who at 8 is a big boy.

Aiden, of course, mostly showed his softer side. "He liked dancing, singing, he used to love Ed Sheeran, Barney. He loved broccoli - which was weird to us. Broccoli! He probably would've eaten it raw."

While Aiden was standoffish with strangers, Fleming said, "He was really bubbly and friendly with us. When I'd walk in the house, he'd run up to me and hug me. He has a younger sister, 2 months old, and he loved her, he'd go up to her and kiss her and smile at her. He smiled all the time. My older nephew got to the point where he wouldn't take pictures with me, but Aiden, I'd say 'Cheese!' and he'd say it and smile! All he did was smile.

He had a favorite book he liked: "I Love You Through and Through," a board book to be read to very young children to assure them that they are always loved, no matter what.

Aiden now is part of a new database on Jacksonville.com that allows readers to search and sort through the 1,167 homicides that occurred in Jacksonville over the past decade, plus new ones as they occur. You can track the victims by neighborhood, cause of death, race, gender, age, arrests and more.

We hope the database will give you insights into this cancer that threatens our city, but it's not enough merely to count the bodies. Look at the 2016 cases, and you'll see the continuation of the urban pathologies of which I've written so much here. By early Friday, all 14 were black, 12 died by gunshot, 11 were male, and they were mostly young.

As you study the database of homicides from the past decade, you can see a pattern: young, poor, single mother ill-equipped to raise a child; absent father; the child unprepared for school; weak family support and engagement with

school; failure; frustration; drop out; and another aimless boy or young man looking for something on the street he hasn't found elsewhere.

Mayor Lenny Curry is hiring more police officers in the new city budget and finding more money for police overtime to saturate high-crime areas. That likely will help, but it's treating the symptoms before treating the disease - like cleaning up the flood water before fixing the leaky pipe that is causing the flood.

A systemic problem demands a systemic solution, and the ultimate solution will be for the community to seriously address the poverty, parenting, family and neighborhood issues that make us the murder capital of Florida.

If you're outraged by Alan Kurdi's death, write the President and your member of Congress.

If you're outraged by Aiden McClendon's death, write Mayor Curry and your City Council member.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Focus on education, jobs, criminal justice to overcome structural racism

By Frank Denton
Posted Feb 13, 2015 at 5:40 PM

Consider an idea for reparations for slavery.

Now that I've got your attention, let me quickly add that I don't mean that white people should write checks to black people. None of the former owned slaves, and none of the latter was one.

Yet, as we continue to see vast gaps between the lives, experiences and beliefs of black and white Americans, you've got to wonder how and when we're going to truly overcome the legacy of that awful institution of previous centuries.

Our eternal preoccupation with race bobbled in several crosscurrents last week.

The popular movie "Selma" reminded us of last century's Civil Rights Movement that led to federal civil and voting rights laws that virtually ended overt segregation and made personal racism socially unacceptable to the vast majority of Americans.

Now we're learning about structural racism, which the Aspen Institute describes as "subtler racialized patterns in policies and practices (that) permeate the political, economic, and sociocultural structures of America in ways that generate differences in well-being between people of color and whites. These dynamics work to maintain the existing racial hierarchy even as they adapt with the times or accommodate new racial and ethnic groups."

The concept became clearer to me when, as part of Aspen's Project Breakthrough, I saw an ABC "Nightline" program about a black female pedestrian killed in a traffic accident in Buffalo. She was crossing a dangerous highway to get from her bus stop to her job in a new suburban shopping mall. The developers had promised prospective tenants that the mall would have

upper-class (that is, white) customers, based on its deliberate location away from poor areas and the bus line used by blacks. Thus the victim's dangerous and ultimately fatal trek to get to work.

No one intended to hurt anyone or even thought of it as discrimination. It was the unforeseen result of an artifact of social and economic patterns derived from ancient and original sin. We often accept structural racism, without thinking about it, as natural, unfortunate, but just reality.

You could see structural racism in the "continuing disparities" in last Sunday's front-page centerpiece by Nate Monroe and Steve Patterson about "Jacksonville's wealth divide:" black unemployment 16.4 percent versus 7.5 percent for whites, black household income $31,911 compared to $55,035 for whites, higher poverty and lower education levels in black areas of the city.

A thoughtful reader, Harvey Slentz of Amelia Island, a lawyer and retired Postal Service executive who now teaches business law and ethics at FSCJ, wrote me that measures of well-being like income, health and happiness are driven largely by two categories of factors: "those that we can influence and those we can't.

"Gender, race and age are, of course, beyond our control. However, education, single parenthood and some other factors are within our control. Much of our discussion in the community centers around race, which is an uncontrollable factor. ... Perhaps we do ourselves a disservice by focusing on that, when it may well be the case that the most influential variable is not race, but education or other things that are within our control.

"I wonder how that very excellent story of two Jacksonvilles would have looked if it had not led with graphs that identified disparities by race, but rather by the differences that are made by educational level, or by the effect of single parenthood? Would it lead the community to more actionable discussions about things we can do something about? A graph depicting racial disparity could lead to frustration. A graph depicting educational disparity could lead to action."

Slentz's excellent perspective reminded me of Monday night's OneJax community meeting at UNF on "Changing the Story of Race in Jacksonville." Small-group conversations among almost 200 people centered on three urban

pathologies: housing segregation, education disparities and the impact of our criminal justice system on the black community.

Actually, at my table, I proposed that we have made impressive progress against residential segregation, as a battery of federal housing laws, such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and executive orders have virtually eliminated discriminatory real-estate practices and integrated many, if not most, formerly all-white neighborhoods. So the real issue there is the money to make the move.

Thus, consider three elements of structural racism dividing our city and preventing racial reconciliation: few and poorly paying jobs, failing or inadequate schools and a criminal justice system that seems to target blacks, especially young men who can never recover.

The OneJax meeting lamented the statistics and the situation for two hours and ended as we almost always do in discussions centered on race: a lot of conversation, a lot of heartfelt concern and compassion, pledges to try to do better.

What if we took a Slentzian perspective on those three issues and - as a caring, compassionate community - took on those pathologies by flipping them into actionable goals for the black community: good jobs, better education and constructive criminal justice?

» Create a focused, meaningful, realistic and funded jobs initiative for Northwest Jacksonville. Actually, there already are plans to prime the pump of neighborhood economic development by helping community-owned businesses fill food, financial and other "deserts" with businesses that are commonplace in other neighborhoods.

"We have all the elements needed to make urban redevelopment happen," said Janet Owens, Jacksonville executive director of the Local Initiatives Support Corp. "We just need the concerted political will between the city executive and legislative branches," which we the people can inspire, in part with our votes next month.

"Of all the ways we can invest in the city," Ben Warner, president and CEO of JCCI, said, "investing in Northwest Jacksonville would do more for the city than anything else. I really believe that. If we could raise the per capita income in the

African-American community up to the median income of the city, it would do more than anything else to transform the city."

» Ensure educational success. So many people and organizations in Jacksonville are working on the public schools and, as we have reported, making some good progress.

The Times-Union is committed to more and bigger journalism on the non-school, family and community issues that undermine student success before they even get to school. As the core of what I have called here our urban pathology, this is the biggest issue affecting the future of Jacksonville.

» Reform the criminal-justice system to emphasize rehabilitation and results, rather than retribution. "This is one of the toughest states to get restoration of rights and a felony record expunged," Warner said. "If you're a young man who commits a crime here, you're likely to be tried as an adult, you're likely to get a felony record, and if you do, you won't be able to work the rest of your life."

There are smart and humane ideas about restorative justice, diversion programs for first offenders, civil citations for lesser crimes and rehabilitation and education in prison. All they require is some leadership. Don't we want ex-offenders to become contributing citizens?

So there's a plan for reparations to take us beyond the worst parts of structural racism. The essential ingredients: open-mindedness, faith, optimism and belief in the human spirit.

It so happens that the main points parallel the Times-Union's journalism priorities. It's a conservative plan because it removes barriers and allows human nature and goodness, innate self-respect and economic incentives to flow naturally and find their own higher levels.

While the plan will require some public investment, it will pay off in long-term financial payoffs through productivity in employment, economic development and savings in the zooming costs of law enforcement and the bulging prison system.

Not to mention allowing us, finally, to get beyond the legacy of slavery.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Reasons to hope for black males

Posted Jun 30, 2013 at 1:53 AM

My least favorite part of the Times-Union is the Law & Disorder report, inside the Metro section every day.

Some readers are drawn to it through schadenfreude to read about victims and suspects of crime, and it is an important part of our coverage of public safety and how our first responders are protecting us.

But in that seemingly endless parade of mug shots, what I see is the underside of life in our town - a montage of failure, misery, addiction, greed and stupidity, people hurting other people and themselves.

We like to report good news, the successes of people and institutions in our community. Law & Disorder documents the failures.

And too often, in fact most days, the faces are disproportionately young black boys and men - angry, mean or scared. A generation passing away before our eyes.

When I arrived in town five years ago and talked to many people who could help me understand this city, I had lunch with Nat Glover, former sheriff and now president of Edward Waters College, and asked him about this assembly-line loss of young black males.

When these youths drop out of school, I remember his saying, if it weren't for the Constitution, we may as well just park a bus behind the school, load them up and take them straight to prison. They're going there eventually anyway, if they live, he said, so we might as well just save the victims and costs of their inevitable crimes.

But drop out of school they do, and head for the streets. While Duval's overall graduation rate continues to improve to almost 70 percent, only 57 percent of African-American youths graduated on time in 2012.

They are 25 percent of the student population but 40 percent of the disciplinary offenses. One-third of black males were disciplined in 2012, and almost 10,000 were suspended, most out of school.

We've written a lot about the stereotypical pathology, which is remarkably valid, some variation of: unprepared teenage mother, absent father, poverty, little early nurturing, unready for school, frustration, lack of home support, peer pressure, failure reinforcing failure, anger, discipline problems, dropout, the street, Law & Disorder.

If you don't care about the young men, consider the pain they cause other people, the crime rate, the cost of law enforcement and incarceration, the loss to the economy of their potential contributions.

I've sat through many meetings and listened to caring people worry about the complicated, seemingly impenetrable causal chain and discuss possible solutions, but aside from the disappearing Jacksonville Journey, there haven't been bold actions to confront this urban reality that is rotting the core of our community.

Until now.

On several fronts, there are serious, systematic, inventive and potentially powerful efforts targeted at saving the black males falling out of society.

That is a central goal of the strategic plan being led by Duval Schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, with the support of a bevy of community leaders and programs. "When I first interviewed for the position," Vitti said, "I had a sense of Jacksonville, but when I analyzed the data, the discrepancy with African-American males, and African-Americans generally compared to whites, was significant and alarming."

Some of Vitti's plans would improve education for all, particularly a greater emphasis on early-childhood education and his planned Parent Academy.

Other plans are targeted at black males. Given the common discipline problems, Vitti is creating a task force of community people to re-examine the schools' code of conduct, to be sure it is progressive and equally applied, with training for administrators, teachers, parents and students.

You saw his determination Friday when the Times-Union reported his firing of a school resource officer, saying, "We have to be clear and show that we're raising the bar of expectations regarding employee discipline and student discipline."

Vitti has announced deans of discipline in every middle school and high school, along with in-school-suspension teachers to reduce out-of-school suspensions. Rather than jumping to suspensions, he wants an emphasis on resolving conflicts where possible, "preventive rather than reactive, that's the key."

The big news coming your way in the next month or so will be bold plans for single-gender education, to relieve some social influences and, as Vitti put it, "to prevent some of the peer pressure associated with being smart."

Next year, the district will be implementing more single-gender classrooms for reading and math.

And starting in 2014-15, Jacksonville likely will have some single-gender schools, largely or entirely African-American, based on the highly successful Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, which claim four-year college acceptance for 100 percent of its graduates, all low-income black males.

Learning from his experience in Miami, Vitti is applying for federal grants to open two college-prep magnet schools, one male and one female, for grades 6-12. "We hope to know in a month," he said.

Even grander, and already approved in concept by the School Board, are three all-male charter schools that have been under development for more than four years by a group led by Cleve Warren, Barbara Darby, Greg Owens and Janet Owens, via their annual Urban Education Symposium.

Warren says they've found start-up capital, outside Jacksonville, and hopes to announce it within the next month.

While a site hasn't been found, he said, it will be on the Northside, with separate elementary, middle and high schools sharing a campus. The schools are to open in August 2014 with about 300 students in a few grades, then ultimately grow over five years to 800-1,000 K-12 boys.

The students will have a longer school day and school year. "For the most part, they will be in school year-round. We won't really let them go," Warren said. They'll eat all three meals on campus and do their "homework" at school, "so we don't have to rely on parental involvement necessarily."

"It's almost a lab school," Darby said. "We're optimistic that, if we can demonstrate a difference for a group of young black males ... then we can increase and expand the concepts and apply them to our public schools."

The schools will be called the Valor Academy of Leadership, and their charter application says their students will be "academically sound, professionally accomplished, morally straight, socially distinguished."

An important component of all these plans is the collaboration and support among the leaders. Warren and Vitti sang each other's praises. "Cleve and I are on the exact same page," the superintendent said. "The same vision and same strategy when it comes to this."

Also supportive is the Jacksonville Public Education Fund. "There's a lot of research that supports the idea of single-gender education," especially for middle school, said Trey Csar, president. "It's an exciting model to explore. The fact it'll be black males adds another dimension."

Csar said a "critically important" factor is who is hired to run the schools. Warren said the organizers already are searching, and have found some talent in Jacksonville's turnaround schools.

Summer normally is a fairly quiet time for education. But as Vitti rolls out his plans and awaits his federal magnet-school grants and the Valor organizers prepare to announce their start-up funding, there's a strong and growing possibility that, someday, we'll have a smaller Law & Disorder.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Role of parents crucial to a child's education

By Frank Denton

Posted Apr 26, 2013 at 11:45 AM

Like a lot of people, I did not have an idyllic childhood. Dysfunctional single-parent family, sometimes chaos and drama, once shunted off to live with relatives who never made it to high school because they had to work on the farm.

But for me, there was one consistency: education.

I was expected to go to school every day unless truly ill. Do my homework. Make good grades. And I was expected to go to college - where or what to study didn't matter. But I was to go to college. And graduate.

My mother, or her surrogates, insisted. No discussion.

Betty Burney, former chair of the Duval County School Board, says her father had the same value, though as a black person growing up in segregated South Carolina, he himself had only a sixth-grade education. "He made the conscious decision he was going to be a good father and his kids were going to get an education. A lot of black fathers made that decision."

Our parents knew that education was the key to a future, but that value and priority have become alien to some in our community, particularly in lower-socioeconomic neighborhoods.

Of course, every parent wants what's best for her or his child, but that doesn't always get translated into dedicated, consistent action, the hard work of day in and day out nurturing and preparing the child for school and supporting the educational process.

So while Jacksonville collectively is working hard to improve its public schools, there is the other side of the equation - what happens at home.

That has been an emphasis in our civic journalism project, "Hope: Raising Our Children," for almost three years now, and it was the subject of Mayor Alvin Brown's Education Summit last month.

Now, a plan is in the works.

The best teacher on the planet will have a tough time working with a child who shows up hungry, dirty, emotionally upset, without a night's sleep or completed homework, and whose parents show little interest in supporting schoolwork.

Studies of urban schools attribute that to a variety of factors, particularly economic hardships and racial and cultural differences between parents and schools.

Burney, who has done her own research as an education consultant and executive director of the I'm A Star Foundation in Northwest Jacksonville, points to the epidemic of teenage girls becoming single parents.

"A lot of parents are very young themselves and don't understand the importance of education. It's a heart-wrenching thing.

"And some young parents don't understand the difference between being a parent and a friend. I think a lot of parents have given in to their kids."

Parental involvement includes communicating with teachers, volunteering at school, helping with homework and PTA membership.

Rhoda London, a retired teacher, wrote me about "the high number of failing schools across the state without PTA organizations. That's my complaint: If parents were involved with their children's schools to begin with, they wouldn't be failing! Schools with good, strong PTAs generally don't."

On the more affluent Southside, Hendricks Avenue Elementary School claims 100 percent PTA membership for 41 years, and Stanton College Prep says 98 percent of its parents are members. Both are A schools.

On the Northside, Matthew Gilbert Middle School, a D school, says fewer than 2 percent of its parents are in the PTA, and Raines High School, a C school, has zero - "planning to develop campaign to build one next year."

In his doctoral thesis last year, schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti pointed to research showing that parental involvement increases student achievement: "Beyond raising test scores and grades, parent involvement also promotes positive student behavior and social skills at school and leads to higher rates of homework completion, attendance, graduation and enrollment in post-secondary education."

Vitti's research assessed the Miami-Dade County Public Schools Parent Academy, begun in 2006 to engage, train and empower parents through classes held all over the district. Almost 200,000 parents took classes in the first five years.

Vitti, who was chief academic officer in Miami, was constructively critical of the academy in his thesis and clearly sees great potential in the concept, which he is now bringing to Jacksonville.

"We've had two planning sessions," he said. "We've identified individuals from the faith community, from nonprofits, regular parents, the university, the business community. We have a group of about 60 individuals divided into subcommittees, and they are working on plans for the Parent Academy. We hope to bring it all together in the next month." It will begin this fall.

You'll wonder about cost. Vitti said the first three years will cost about $1 million, mostly private contributions. Classes will be held all over the district, in schools, churches, hospitals and other sites, and with private partners.

He envisions a parent academy better than Miami's. "When you look at Jacksonville, there is such a difference, in civic engagement and commitment to public education.

"In Miami, it was hard to get the community to recognize that public education is important, beyond the business community. Here, you have so many committed people. It's leveraging all that energy and resources and alignment."

From her perspective on the front lines, Burney believes the parent academy will help parents "who don't know how to be good parents. If you don't know better, you can't do better. But if someone can show you how to be empowered, you can be.

"I know for a fact it is possible to teach them to be good parents. Some of them will go to the parent academy. Some of them won't, and we've got to find a way to get to them."

One of Burney's most vivid childhood memories is from 1963, when Alabama Gov. George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door to bar black students from integrating the University of Alabama.

"My daddy made us sit down and watch it on TV. I turned to my dad and said, 'When I'm a lady, I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way.' "

These days, the person blocking the schoolhouse door may be the child's own parent.

We must pull her inside.

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Frank Denton: How to keep kids out of Judge Davis' court

Posted Nov 26, 2013 at 2:52 PM

If I had to sit in Circuit Court Judge Henry Davis' chair every day, I probably would have cracked and spoken up before he did.

But it took the mild-mannered, soft-spoken juvenile judge seven years of trying to figure out what to do with the random human disasters standing before him - what our Matt Soergel described as "a daily collection of police reports on juveniles, a never-ending chronicle of violence and disrespect. A daily procession of juveniles, from accused shoplifters and drug abusers, to thieves and violent thugs."

Finally, Davis sat down and wrote the Times-Union the painful letter that has become a point of discussion and disagreement across the community. Because of these "violent" children, he wrote in his most piercing sentence, "It is now quite evident that it is not possible to operate a high quality public school system in Duval County."

Leaders of Duval public schools and the NAACP quickly challenged Davis, both his facts and the propriety of his speaking out, but others supported him. "I'm really happy he brought the issue up," said Jon Heymann, CEO/executive director of the Jacksonville Children's Commission. "In my experience, there is much more violence than is being reported. It's bleeding - violence, bullying and drugs."

When the judge met with our editorial board last week (see a video in the Opinion Page Blog on jacksonville.com/opinion), he was still fatalistic. I asked him for solutions, but really all he could suggest was to keep bad kids out of school and let good kids go to any school they want.

Heymann, more solution-oriented, says the schools' Code of Student Conduct should be enforced more vigorously, and serious offenders should be sorted out and sent to alternative schools, taught by tough "missionaries."

That's fine for the immediate problem, and with determination we might save some of those lost souls. But our primary focus should be on the big picture, the larger, long-term issue of who or what created those aspiring young criminals. If we can sanitize the source, in the home and the community, the next generation of urban youth will be able to envision a real future and apply their considerable energy to achieving it.

We've already invested in the prison beds awaiting the current crop of thugs; investing to keep the upcoming generation in school and on a course to success would be a lot cheaper and much more productive for our community - not to mention more humane.

"People say it's the parents' responsibility," Heymann said, "but when they don't do it ..."

When they don't do it, the community takes over responsibility, one way or the other - hiring police officers, funding courthouses and building prisons, or hiring teachers and social workers and funding classrooms.

The former is reactive and negative; the latter requires a leap of faith - and mind-set. Faith that it will work, mind-set that it's the smart and right thing to do.

Heymann is only three months into his job leading the city commission responsible for funding and monitoring the nonprofit organizations that work with children, primarily those in greatest need of help. He brings to the job a career in similar work, the last 14 years leading the Communities in Schools project, which helps the neediest kids in the public schools.

With confidence that the schools can do their own job of educating the kid who is present, able and ready to learn, he is focusing the Children's Commission on "OST," out-of-school time - starting with early-childhood learning but then positive after-school activities and summer learning, so kids don't lose their learning gains over the vacation from the classroom.

"We have to make a massive positive difference for the greatest number of children in the shortest amount of time," Heymann said. "While these programs are making a massive positive difference, they need to be brought to scale."

That means, of course, that money is a major barrier. He estimates that the after-school and summer programs reach only about 25 percent of the children who would benefit from them.

"In the heyday," he said, "we never turned a child away for after-school or summer camps. But that's not the case now. We have seat limits."

The heyday would have been before 2008, because since then, Children's Commission funding has been reduced every year. The 2008 appropriation of $26 million is now $19 million (plus some Jacksonville Journey money that came already assigned to other projects), a cut of $540,000 from last year.

By comparison, Pinellas County, which is about the same population as Duval, is investing $49 million, an increase of $1.5 million over last year. Miami-Dade, Palm Beach and Broward counties have more people, but they also invest disproportionately more. Miami-Dade, which has three times the population, makes five times the investment - $95 million.

But then Miami-Dade has a dedicated children's tax, made permanent a few years ago by 83 percent of the voters.

"I think that would happen here," Heymann said, but unlike the seven other children's commissions around the state, Jacksonville's doesn't have taxing authority.

"If this were a business model, investing in children has a tremendous economic impact for a city. It's not hard to prove."

He points to research by Nobel Prize-winning economic James Heckman, who has written: "Every dollar invested in quality early childhood development for disadvantaged children produces a 7 percent to 10 percent return, per child, per year."

On the other hand, Florida spends $18,000 a year to house and feed each prison inmate, not counting the cost of the criminal justice system that sent him or her there, or the cost of building the prison in the first place, or the loss of economic productivity, or the societal and personal costs of crime.

Heymann said, "You can say, 'If parents did their job, the Jacksonville Children's Commission wouldn't have to exist,' or 'If the churches did their job, the Jacksonville Children's Commission wouldn't have to exist.'

"But if we don't get to the children sooner and stop using poverty or parents as an excuse, then 15 years from now, we're going to be having the same conversation about the next generation of children."

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Frank Denton: The magic ingredient of good schools

By Frank Denton
Posted Oct 30, 2015 at 9:29 PM

You might have gotten a jolt of cognitive dissonance Wednesday when our front page blared that "the Nation's Report Card" ranked Duval County Public Schools highly among major urban school districts across the country.

After all, you may have been conditioned to believe that many of Jacksonville's public schools are not so good relative to other local districts according to the ever-changing state assessments.

But our centerpiece story said Jacksonville's public schools ranked very high compared to other major urban school districts by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which our Denise Amos called "the largest and most consistent measure of student knowledge across school districts and states."

The assessment covered Duval and 20 other major urban school districts, including Boston, Austin, New York City, San Diego and Charlotte, all of which also have economically and socially diverse student bodies. Duval kids were fourth among the 21 districts in fourth-grade reading and math, seventh in eighth-grade math and second in eighth-grade reading.

Enjoy that good news for a moment. There'll be more soon, from our new mayor.

But think about what makes a successful school. The first thing that comes to mind is the quality of the teachers, and that is essential, as well as good administration and adequate facilities.

But let's be honest. A - or more likely *the* - prime factor is the raw ingredient: the students who show up at the door. Do they come in with the foundation knowledge for their grade level? Have they been socialized to learn with others

in a classroom? Are they well fed, rested and focused? Do they have home support and parental involvement?

My daughters graduated from a high school in Madison, Wis., which was reputed to be one of the best high schools in the country - largely because the students tended to be middle- to upper-middle class, many of them the children of University of Wisconsin faculty members. You can bet those kids did their homework.

When the St. Johns County school leaders and advocates met with our editorial board to advocate for a sales tax increase on the ballot this week, they said their schools are so good that people are flocking to St. Johns from everywhere, requiring six new schools a year for the foreseeable future. Finally, I had to ask if they realized their success is greatly related to the fact that their students are socioeconomically homogeneous (to put it delicately). Well, yes, they acknowledged.

Given that, you have to ask whether St. Johns schools are "better" than the Duval public schools, as is common wisdom, or is the difference the socioeconomic diversity - the big urban school district with all kinds of kids and sizable pockets of poverty compared to the suburban district packed with middle- to upper-middle-class kids.

That's not an excuse for Duval, but rather the challenge.

Go back to Wednesday's front page and look at the actual test results. As good as they looked against other urban students, only 22 percent of Jacksonville's eighth-graders were found proficient in math and 31 percent in reading. Among fourth-graders, 41 percent were proficient in math and 35 percent in reading.

Those scores may look good relatively but certainly not absolutely.

In fact, the headline nationally was that, for the first time in 25 years, the overall NAEP math scores actually dropped, as did eighth-grade reading.

Not coincidentally, the percentage of students taking the test who are poor or Hispanic increased.

Motoko Rich of The New York Times summarized the connection: "Students from poor families often arrive at school with smaller vocabularies than students from middle-class or more affluent households, and are faced with challenges like hunger, homelessness and parents working several jobs, all of which can interfere with their learning in school and the academic support they receive at home - and ultimately their test scores."

So many people in Jacksonville are working on improving our public schools, but there still is that problem with the raw ingredients.

The best teacher in the fanciest school will have trouble reaching a kid who shows up hungry, sleep-deprived, poorly parented, behind the class academically and still recoiling from the domestic chaos, multiple traumas and even violence that are part of our urban pathology of poverty.

Times-Union journalists and members of the editorial board meet often with local officials and political candidates, and I routinely ask them whether local government has a role in dealing with those urban pathologies in and around the home that, right from the cradle, too often doom poor children to fall behind in school, then fail and drop out and fall into crime or another generation of poverty.

That can sound like a liberal/conservative, big-government/small-government trap, so most of their answers are evasive, vague or noncommittal, even when I point out that this urban pathology is Jacksonville's biggest problem, more than pension funding, which is only about money.

But then I asked new Mayor Lenny Curry: "Is it the city's role to take some responsibility when there's family breakdown, absent fathers, mothers who may be illiterate or working nights?"

"Yes," he said, simply and directly.

"That ought to be part of the [Jacksonville] Journey program," within legal and jurisdictional limits.

Then Curry elaborated: "As early as possible, I think it starts before the child is even born in many cases. Part of it is education and conversation that that brain is developing before that child is even born. And the environment that the child

is in before it's born, there is something happening with the brain and then the moment that the child is born ... the first three or four years is so critical, and there are some parents that just don't know that.

"So I do think it's the city's role. Put in on my list. And we've talked about this, to be a part of that educational process."

He searched to remember a concept he knew about, then found it: "1,000 days to build a brain."

That is the belief among early-childhood development experts that those first days are the most important period in a child's life. (See box above, for example, the "5 R's" for pediatricians' advice on brain development.)

The fact that the new mayor gets it - and has it on his list - could turn out to be the best education news we could report.

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Opinion

Lead Letter: New Town is a community development effort that should expand

By Jim Crooks
Posted Sep 8, 2015 at 2:50 PM

Reflecting on Editor Frank Denton's thoughtful column in Sunday's Times-Union, I appreciated his description of the work of East Lake Foundation in Atlanta transforming an impoverished neighborhood and the creation of the Purpose Built Communities consulting firm.

"Transforming community development work" as Denton describes it, focuses on three essential elements: housing, education from kindergarten (or Pre-K) through college and health and wellness programs

Denton knows that closer to home in Jacksonville, we already have one such community development effort in the New Town Success Zone where more than 20 nonprofit and public agencies have collaborated for the past seven years to reach similar goals.

In housing, Habijax has focused its entire efforts in recent years building and repairing more than 200 homes in New Town.

The Duval County Public Schools have intensified efforts to improve S. P. Livingston elementary and Eugene Butler middle school leading to single gender programs at Butler with student uniforms. Anecdotal evidence points to early student academic improvement

At the Schell-Sweet Center on the Edward Waters campus, Family Support Services under the auspices of the Florida Department of Children and Families has provided health and wellness services.

In addition, crime rates are down significantly thanks to community policing that has opened lines of communication between residents and the Sheriff's Office.

And there is more.

The community "quarterback" for this sustained effort over the past seven years has been PeDro Cohen. Though Cohen is leaving for a new executive position at the YMCA, there are several excellent candidates, and there is hope his replacement will be in place by the end of September.

All of this work has been done without major funding from any foundation after the first year. One can only imagine what more could have been done with additional financial help.

What's needed now is to expand the New Town effort to other neighborhoods. With adequate support, Fresh Ministries of Springfield could build on its community development efforts in East Jacksonville.

Paul Tutwiler could expand his community development corporation in Durkeeville and beyond.

Jacksonville has community leaders to transform development locally. What it needs are the financial resources to build the collaborative partnerships as New Town has done.

Maybe the Community Foundation, with its many generous benefactors, could provide the fuel to expand existing public-private efforts to develop other lower-income communities in Jacksonville.

Jim Crooks, Jacksonville

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Building a community that works

By Frank Denton
Posted Sep 4, 2015 at 5:52 PM

CHAUTAUQUA, N.Y. | You probably love, or at least like, your community, or else you'd move. But think about why you chose it.

Humans being the complex creatures we are, our conceptions of livable communities are no less complicated.

A series of community builders and thinkers explored "Creating Livable Communities" over my week at the Chautauqua Institution, the education and arts community here. Their ideas and experiences can help us understand how to make more of Jacksonville more livable.

Ethicist Jason Robert pointed out merely defining livability can be a "wicked" problem because we don't all share the same values. To him, livability is more than just sustenance, but rather "a healthy, convivial society."

In other words, good shopping, parks and a short commute don't make a community livable; it needs "human flourishing and not just narrow personal interests."

I have made the case here that the new Jacksonville will not truly flourish until the good life here is accessible by all who want it. We face daunting challenges fueled by poverty and our mental-health, education and criminal-justice systems, or non-systems - interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

While many of the forces at work are complex, their impacts can be simplified. Douglas Jutte, who runs the Building Health Places Network collaborating across health and community development, gave this formula to have a 90 percent chance of avoiding being poor: Graduate from high school, don't have kids before marriage, and avoid going to prison.

That's easily accomplished by most of us, but our public and private systems often seem designed for people to fail. For example, he said, "Medicaid will pay for multiple hospitalizations for dehydration for my granny but will not pay for an air conditioner" that would simply prevent the dehydration in the first place.

If you spit your coffee at the thought of Medicaid buying air conditioners, consider the return on investment of the Nurse-Family Partnership, a maternal and early-childhood health program that sends nurses to help first-time mothers and their babies get a healthy start. Jutte said it's $7 to $14 for each dollar invested.

He suggested that's where conservatives and liberals can find common ground. The Left can accept a "rights-based," humanitarian reason for such efforts, while the Right can see the return on investment in helping people become self-supporting taxpayers with no need for government programs.

For me, the most exciting discussions at Chautauqua were about a comprehensive, focused effort to change a neighborhood's entire ecosystem. While improving one or two elements, such as housing or the school, might help, that easily could be poisoned and negated by other elements, such as crime or unemployment.

After all, poverty and its pathologies are essentially geographic. Jutte cited research showing "enormous disparities" between nearby communities: A Minneapolis study found an eight-year difference in life expectancy between neighborhoods only a few freeway exit ramps away. New Orleans statistics show neighborhood differences of up to 25 years in life expectancies at birth.

"Your ZIP code is more important than your genetic code," Jutte said.

For example, 30317 in southeast Atlanta.

Carol Naughton, president of a nonprofit called Purpose Built Communities, said that 20 years ago, the East Lake public-housing project of 650 apartments was "scary, hopeless," controlled by "drug boys," with a crime rate 18 times the national average and average income of $4,500, as only 13 percent of the occupants had a job. Nine of 10 of them had been crime victims. Police wouldn't go there without backup.

Then, in 1995, a wealthy real-estate developer, Thomas G. Cousins, started the East Lake Foundation to try a comprehensive reinvention of the community in collaboration with public and private partners. It started by working with the Atlanta Housing Authority to temporarily relocate the public-housing residents while rebuilding their apartments and reserving half for market-rate renters for economic integration.

The foundation worked with Atlanta Public Schools to start the city's first public charter school and created a "cradle to college education program." It bought and restored an old golf course to create jobs and teach young people. Private businesses, including Wal-Mart, Publix and Wells Fargo, moved into the area. The YMCA came in.

"The results are stunning," Cousins wrote in the Wall Street Journal. "Violent crime is down more than 90 percent. Crime overall is down 73 percent - a level 50 percent better than the rest of Atlanta. Employment among families on welfare has increased to 70 percent from 13 percent in 1995. (The other 30 percent are elderly, disabled or in job training.) The income of these publicly assistant families has more than quadrupled."

The K-8 school, he wrote, has "the top performing elementary school in the Atlanta school system." The middle school is top five.

Naughton, who started the project as a top executive with the Housing Authority but then served seven years as executive director of the East Lake Foundation, said at Chautauqua, "The quality of education sustains neighborhood revitalization. These kids won't need subsidized housing."

Inspired by the success of East Lake, Naughton co-founded Purpose Built Communities in 2008. The nonprofit consulting firm is doing what she calls "transformative community development work" in about a dozen communities, mostly in the south. She was joined at Chautauqua by leaders from Atlanta, Omaha and New Orleans, and the next project is in Orlando.

Naughton said the ideal purpose-built project starts with a defined neighborhood and rebuilds holistically around three essential elements: mixed-income housing, pre-school to college education and health and wellness programs and facilities.

"It works," she said. "Our model resonates with the people who are in the middle 60 percent of the political spectrum. They believe in problem-solving and so do we." She pointed out that her foundation was funded by a Democrat, a Republican and an independent.

Naughton emphasized that an essential element in any purpose-built community effort is a "community quarterback," usually a new, single-purpose nonprofit such as the East Lake Foundation, which was "the glue and the grease" among all the public and private partners. Such an organization is like a "general contractor" to coordinate, and if necessary cajole, the public-private partners.

So, if Jacksonville were to commit to reinventing a purpose-built community to cure our crippling urban pathologies, who or what might be our community quarterback?

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Some education progress happens when school's out

By Frank Denton
Posted Jul 18, 2015 at 5:06 PM

Last week was a good one for education in Jacksonville.

How, you ask? School's out, and the kids are in mid-vacation.

But that doesn't include all the people across the community who are working year-round to build an education system to give all our children a fair shot at a successful future.

First, I hope you saw our Metro headline: "Head Start test score results promising," with the subhead "Impressive academic progress ..."

That was in sweet relief from a long series of depressing headlines throughout 2013 when federal education officials first investigated then suspended the Urban League's administration of Jacksonville's Head Start and Early Head Start programs to prepare low-income children for school. Over 17 years, the League annually had gotten about $15 million of your tax money to run up to 24 centers, with about 2,000 children.

But the centers had been cited eight times for using corporal punishment, nine times for inadequate supervision and eight times for security problems. The T-U reported that one 3-year-old was left on a bus for a six-hour school day without food or water, and another's shoulder was dislocated when a teacher jerked her by the arms. Officials cited "serious risks to the health and safety of children and staff."

The education itself was also inadequate. At one point, we reported, more than 80 percent of the voluntary pre-kindergarten programs run by the Urban League's Head Starts were low-performing.

Finally, the feds just booted the Urban League and took over the program.

Flash forward to last week, when the new Head Start administrator - Lutheran Services Florida, an experienced provider - released its first test scores and said that, after only a year, the children's academic growth was promising, sometimes even above national averages.

Louis Finney, executive vice president of LSF for children and Head Start, said the quick results came from a serious, experienced approach to early-childhood education: improving classroom technology, teacher training, research-based curriculum and assessments and parental involvement. "Parents know coming on board there are take-home activities. They have to read to their children."

Finney said the kids were in class for 220 8-hour days, compared to 160 6-hour days previously. "We did that because our research states that children forget things over summertime, but also it's just a better practice for the children and more reasonable for working parents. A 12-month interaction allows us to implement the curriculum better."

"We're happy to get these kinds of results, but we have higher expectations," said Heidi Greenslade, LSF director of early learning research and training. "I'm just glad to have these first-year results because it was a challenging transition, not only for the children and the parents but also the community. We still have a ways to go."

She complimented the Early Learning Coalition of Duval as a community partner and its president and CEO, Susan Main.

For her part, Main said, "Lutheran is really committed to ensuring that Head Start and Early Head Start are of the highest quality. They know how to do it. They've succeeded in a lot of areas of Florida. They're going to be a great partner in our community.

"They serve our most impoverished children, because Head Start starts at 100 percent of poverty. These children are our most at-risk. Head Start's program wraps around a lot of services for these children and their families included. These children need a lot of instruction, a lot of nurturing.

"I think we're now on the right track," Main said. "This is a good start. We have a long way to go."

So that was last week's best hard news about the future of our children, but there was more.

W.C. Gentry, the lawyer and civic and education leader, held another meeting of the Read It Forward Jax Coalition, the nonprofit he has formed in the face of studies showing that about half of Duval high school graduates can't read at the 12th grade level. The "community-wide coalition," with members representing three dozen large and small nonprofits and government agencies, is working with the public schools to build "support for reading and a culture of literacy."

With concentrations in "tracking and data sharing," engaging the community, learning at pre-kindergarten through third grade, and making books more available in libraries and after school, the group is organizing toward a summit and strategic planning this fall. It intends to be laser-focused on reading as the key to success in our schools.

And then on Thursday, renowned poet Nikki Giovanni brought her star power to town to talk about reading and poetry to education leaders and teachers at the Duval County Public Schools' first Literacy Expo, part of Superintendent Nikolai Vitti's plan to improve reading proficiency among students.

Giovanni was among eight literacy experts who, over four days, spoke and conducted workshops for almost 250 registered reading coaches and language-arts teachers who came on their own time to learn how better to teach reading.

So even without kids in school, last week was a good one for education in Jacksonville.

Cheryl Fountain, professor and executive director of the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida, has been watching local education since she came to UNF in 1981, and she thinks "this is a good time for Jacksonville" with collaborations among the schools and other caring organizations to help "minimize the silo thinking we've had previously.

"In the past few years, we've had in Jacksonville a change in leadership in organizations that support education and in the K-12 system. Vitti has brought in a different perspective.

"Now, everyone recognizes - the community, the school district, other government agencies - that if our children are going to succeed and flourish, we have to support learning not just during school, but learning has to occur before school, after school and all summer.

"We are at a point in time where we have an opportunity to take advantage and build on the assets we have in our city so our children can realize their dreams. What I'm hoping is the stars are aligned."

So take some comfort. Even in these dog days of summer, when we don't get to publish cute, happy faces in classrooms but rather the police mug shots of those who didn't make it through class, we have a committed team of education and community leaders hard at work on the heavy lifting of educating our children.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Jacksonville's big challenge goes beyond mere money

Posted Jun 19, 2015 at 6:03 PM

Mayor-elect Lenny Curry and his transition team were working intensely at City Hall last week sorting problems, programs and priorities in preparation for his taking office in 10 days and having to submit a budget 19 days later.

We can only hope they were taking time to read the Times-Union because Thursday's front page inadvertently presented Curry's two biggest, and probably most expensive, challenges.

One was across the top of the page under the headline "Prospects positive for pension deal," which will require the city to come up with several hundred million dollars to adequately fund the Police and Fire Pension Fund.

But that's only money.

The much tougher challenge was in the centerpiece package under this headline: "Children in the crime wave," next to photos of a handcuffed 16-year-old charged with shooting up a school bus and of a 13-year-old boy - yes, 13! - charged with murder while he and two other teenagers were trading guns with a man at a gas station at 2:50 a.m.

I hope the Curry team paused at the obvious question of how children, so many children in this town, can suddenly, seemingly overnight, go from basketball, bicycles and games to violence, guns and death.

The transition team must know that the answer is more than some genetic flaw or freak occurrence.

Even if those two boys eventually are found not guilty, such children are products of a toxic stew of congenital factors, influences and events, the mixture of which results in failed human beings. Pick your poisons: poor parenting,

poverty, bad neighborhood with drugs and violence, inattention to early development, illiteracy, failure in school, wild on the streets at 2:50 a.m. - together resulting in criminal justice to imprison lives and tax dollars and depress your quality of life.

Just as the destruction of these children was systematic - "interacting bodies under the influence of related forces" - so must be the salvation of the next generation.

There are three local beacons to give heart and inspiration to the Curry team. If the team truly wants to make an impact, they should consider adopting all three. They really are aimed at the same urban pathologies from different directions, and together they could have transformative power.

First, the New Town Success Zone, modeled after the famous Harlem Children's Zone, was designed to coordinate more than 30 existing programs and focus them as a system on children in 15 square blocks of the West Side plagued by poverty, crime and failure. The goal is to keep children healthy and prepared to succeed in school and later life.

After seven years, is it working?

We don't know yet. The Center for Urban Education and Policy at the University of North Florida is working on a "community indicators report" to measure whether crime, education, housing and health have changed. It will be completed and released in August.

There also will be a qualitative assessment, based on interviews with leaders of programs working in New Town. "Everybody that I talked to, across the board, the heads of government agencies and nonprofit and grass-roots community organizations, had very positive things to say," said Mary Rose, director of the center.

"It's obvious to them that it's very valuable to have an organization like that in the neighborhood. Agencies come in and out with their programs depending on what funding there is, but the New Town Success Zone is something that's always there. The community feels a sense of ownership, that it's an advocate for them."

Pam Paul, co-chair of the zone, said: "What we really want to know is how the kids are doing. We think they're doing well. While their absences from school have been cut drastically, some of them are doing OK but not exceptionally well in school.

"What we've learned from this whole thing I'd love to impart to anyone who would listen is that poor people have different sets of problems.

"When we came to New Town, we really didn't understand about food, clothing and shelter. The Harlem Children's Zone didn't focus on it; it focused on programs for the children. So we dutifully focused on programs, but then we found that children didn't have winter coats, there wasn't food in the house. It's so much more complicated than after-school programs or tutoring or anything we do.

"It's been a learning experience for everybody. In order for children to succeed, the household needs to succeed."

Think of the household as a system and the forces that harm or help the household as the larger, encompassing system.

The second beacon for the Curry team focuses on exactly that.

About the same time the New Town Success Zone started, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund organized community leaders and a process to figure out what a family needs to escape poverty. After considerable research and pilot tests, they identified nine necessary "pivotal assets:" quality child care, affordable housing, transportation, parenting and financial-literacy skills, money management, the Earned Income Tax Credit, resolution of criminal background, job training and accountability.

The researchers found that, while there are many social service organizations in Jacksonville, they were not coordinated into a system. Each operated with its own target families, rules and criteria, sometimes even at odds with each other, or at least not complementary. "Engagement and collaboration between organizations is crucial," they said in a report. "Efforts to create major change require perseverance, patience and sustain focus on a limited number of strategies."

Thus was born "1,000 in 1,000: Moving 1,000 people out of poverty every 1,000 days," led by Family Foundations but allied with a great array of social and government agencies. It is a "systems-change model focused on the realignment of existing community resources" to develop life skills and assets for about 360 families.

"Families can get out of poverty," Family Foundations President Dawn Lockhart told the Times-Union editorial board. "[We have] created a model that shows which families are ready to do that, and it has produced an impressive body of work."

Lockhart points out that most of us have systems to help us that poor people don't, like bank overdraft protection. If they bounce a check or neglect to change the address on their driver's licenses, they can get a felony criminal record and never be able to get a job.

A year into the program, almost 100 families are enrolled. The first family was a mother, who was a nursing assistant, and her two kids. Already, through the collaborating agencies, she has had a career assessment at FSCJ, got scholarships to work toward becoming an LPN, then an RN, has a personal work plan, had her credit report reviewed, cleared up some payday loans, got bus passes to get to school and work, got her kids into an early-learning center and has an 1,000-day personal work plan for which she is being held accountable. Her progress, Lockhart said, is "not perfect" but is progress.

The program costs about $7,700 per family, and the "1,000 in 1,000" research projects a return on investment over a lifetime of $16.23 for each $1 invested, both in increased family income and in decreased support costs.

In her 20 years of working in Jacksonville, Lockhart said, "I have never seen a community come together and a body of work like I've seen Jacksonville come together around '1,000 in 1,000.' This has transcended individual organizations and leaders."

But Lockhart acknowledges, "We have to prove the model."

Which brings us to the third beacon for the Curry transition team.

The Jacksonville Journey grew out of community outrage over the 2006 murder of an 8-year-old girl, DreShawna Davis. Former Mayor John Peyton rallied more than 140 community leaders and experts to study the disease of crime, not just symptoms or body counts.

In 2009, they developed a coordinated plan for a set of crime prevention and intervention initiatives, and the city committed $31 million for the first year, actually $15 million for actual programs. Then that was cut to $13.5 million the next year, then $12 million the next, then $10.7 million, then $8.6 million, then .... you get the idea.

In his campaign for mayor, Curry promised to revive the Journey.

So the Curry team can look for light from those three beacons of great theory and ideas: a place-based system that is still being evaluated, a poverty-based system that is only a year old and a crime-prevention system that was never given a chance to work.

A cynic could look at that and demand evidence of effectiveness and success. This optimist sees logic, more efficient use of our abundant resources, great work by smart and caring people and real hope for the future of the new Jacksonville.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Do social programs really work?

By Frank Denton
Posted Jun 5, 2015 at 6:30 PM

If you're not walking with a little more spring in your step this week, you haven't been reading our Remarkable Seniors profiles, with their inspiring stories of resilience and redemption among our high school graduates.

Carlos Santos was smuggled out of Honduras to escape a death warrant on his family. Sara Touchan fled radical terrorists in Syria to save her life. Zina Simpson, who suffered physical abuse and homelessness, had to care for her younger siblings when their parents disappeared.

Chance Thompson has autism, Collin Hazelip has Down syndrome and Megan Hinkle has juvenile arthritis.

Remarkable Seniors 2015: Meet the students

Ashley Kimball works 40-60 hours a week to support herself through high school. Kyle Dudley never knew his father, and his drug-addicted mother died.

All of them are graduating from our schools with honors, some with academic honors, too.

Their proud walks across Jacksonville stages to receive their high school diplomas are a remarkable tribute to their personal strength and determination against tough odds - and to the caring adults, schools and other support structures that welcomed and helped them.

While their success is some wonderful synergy between their personal nature and community nurture, this week again raises a primal question for the new Jacksonville: When some of our neighbors can't reach that first or second step on the ladder, what is the responsibility of the community to help? What is the right or smart thing to do?

My column here last week suggested that such efforts as the promising single-gender experiment at the former Eugene J. Butler Middle School in Northwest Jacksonville can be one antidote for the urban pathology of poor and poorly parented kids failing in school, dropping out and ultimately feeding this city's crime problem.

I got some thunderous responses.

Wes Niehaus of Fernandina Beach sought to ascribe blame within the largely black community in the inner city: "The black community, especially the black pastors, have failed to address the real problem destroying their communities - the immorality and entitlement culture which permeates their communities nationwide. ... The problem is the breakdown of the black family. Instead of 'preaching' morality, hard work, and education lead to success, the black pastors blame the white man, Republicans, and the police for the black community's horrific criminal and immoral behavior. ...

"There is really nothing which will help these communities until they face the truth and address the real problem. ... I believe the black community has reached a point of no return because they continue to slaughter and imprison their own people at rates which are alarming to a civilized society."

Even if one accepts the notion that the entire community has some responsibility to give disadvantaged people a leg up, Bill Barclay of Jacksonville challenged my statement that, after a half century since the War on Poverty, experts have shown that, while some "social programs" don't work, others do.

"Government education 'experts' boast of a local increase in graduation rates," he wrote, "but those same graduates can't adequately read or write, [are] unable to fill out an application for a job and need remedial classes to be admitted into a 'real' college or to hopefully remain in one.

"Other government 'experts' told us ObamaCare would have no strain on the deficit and premiums would come down 20 percent. We have government 'experts' that tell us there is global warming. ...

"I don't understand the 'feel good' series on 'Transforming Butler.' To me it's little more than an attempt for liberals to show 'good intentions' and that 'they care' with a dash of 'Hope and Change.' Billions later, I'm still waiting for some

success of the very related 50-year-old 'War on Poverty' that 'experts' said would work."

There are different kinds of experts, and I ended my week with personal conversations with four of them. Allow me to introduce you.

Three of them got a hand up from the Pace Center for Girls, one of those social programs supported by a combination of state and local tax money and your charitable contributions.

» Anastasia Hernon had just turned 8 when she lost her father to cancer, and her mother turned to cleaning houses to feed the family. Anastasia developed "a lot of resentment and anger, a lot of trust issues with adults. There was no one there for us.

"I ended up falling into not the best groups of friends. I was exposed to drugs and alcohol at an early age, 11 when it started. At 13, I failed out of middle school, straight F's. I was arrested for shoplifting."

The court sent her to Pace. "I did a lot of counseling," Anastasia said. "A big thing for me, an individual counselor I could talk to about my issues. Or just sit in her office and not talk, which helped. They helped me find resources, like bus passes and bus routes and scholarships.

"They were the people who came in and took care of me for absolutely no reason. It was completely unexpected. I wouldn't be where I am today."

Where Anastasia is today at 23 is a full-time real-estate agent working her way through Jacksonville University as a full-time student in aviation management.

» Mia Paz was sexually abused by her uncle from the sixth grade until high school, and that drove her to alcohol, marijuana and misbehavior that got her expelled from school in Orlando, then from an alternative school.

"There were no other options after that, either be home-schooled or truant. My parents worried I would end up a drug-addicted prostitute," she said. "When I first went to Pace (which is based in Jacksonville but has branches around the state), I had nowhere else to go.

It was there that she disclosed her abuse. "At Pace, I felt safe enough to speak about things I had kept secret for so long. They gave me the attention I was looking for all along," as well as all the school work she could handle and then more school work.

"Therapy and healing, it all started with Pace for me. It was almost like having another parent. I wasn't just a student, a number. I was Mia, and they loved me.

"Pace was the difference maker, really. I don't know how I would have gotten this far if I hadn't gotten their support."

How far she has gotten is graduating from high school on time, then from community college and from the University of Central Florida in 2012. Three weeks ago, Mia graduated from Vermont Law School, and tomorrow she starts the prep work to take the bar exam.

» Sriya Bhattacharyya's mother was so mentally ill and abusive that she was ordered to stay away from her children. The father, an immigrant, was "a very reserved man," and Sriya's brother ended up addicted to drugs and in and out of prison.

"I was struggling with all this," she said. "I was young, and there was not much support in my life. The world around me was pretty chaotic.

"I dropped out of middle school, I was so down on myself. I came close to trying to hurt myself. I just didn't see a point to existing any more. I just withdrew from reality and stopped talking to people. I was on the verge of getting involved in illegal activities, drugs and like that."

Truant, she was sent to the Children's Advocacy Center in Ocala, supported by your state tax dollars and donations, and then to the Pace center.

"Pace did all kinds of things for me, half counseling and half academics, equal emphasis," Sriya said. "It provided me a supportive atmosphere, like having a stable family. The teachers went out of their way to help and engage student, to be with them where they were, to help them through their unique struggles. It was a phenomenal way to build my confidence."

Like Mia, she specifically pointed to a Pace program called Spirited Girls, "a very transformative class and experience. As a girl, I felt very disempowered in society, with most of the decisions made by others. I got to define who I am.

"It's been a journey," Sriya said. "I'm really grateful for programs like Pace, where they work with people who are at their most vulnerable times. They could go down one of two paths, one to success and the other at rock bottom."

Sriya chose the former. "I wasn't expecting to go to college, I had been told I couldn't do it." But she went to a technical institute to finish high school. "I got all A's my first semester, and that really surprised me."

She graduated from community college, then from the University of Florida "with 4.0 and summa cum laude." She is now a Ph.D. student at Boston College, concentrating in human rights and international justice.

When she becomes Dr. Bhattacharyya, "I hope to do a mix of teaching and research and working with marginalized populations, either nationally or internationally." I suggested Jacksonville.

» Oran Sherrer,18, is not one of our official Remarkable Seniors, but he is a remarkable senior.

His background unfortunately is unremarkable. His parents split when he was 8 or 9, and he was bounced back and forth between Jacksonville and Georgia. Finally, his dad just went away. His mom tried but couldn't get Oran focused on school.

He failed third grade "for being the class clown," then used his sister as a "cheat sheet" to get through middle school. In high school, "I realized school wasn't for me. I stopped going to class and found new friends and got in all types of trouble."

It started with marijuana in the eighth grade. I'll spare you the details of his rap sheet, but it includes alcohol, various pills, "shrooms" (mushrooms), codeine, something called "Dirty Sprite" and a flirting relationship with cocaine and heroin. He was arrested only for shoplifting, but almost for possessing "a lot of drugs."

"My grades plummeted, D's and F's," he said. "School didn't seem right for me. I thought my future was living in the streets, that would be my life."

Finally, Oran was caught smoking marijuana in the school restroom and sent to rehab, which led to Communities in Schools, which you support with your tax and charity dollars, and to Bridge to Success, an alternative public-school program at Raines High School.

There, he said he found people who understood him, who told him he had value and potential and who focused him on schoolwork and staying straight.

Specifically, he found Carmelita Warren, site coordinator for CIS. "She actually would bend some rules for me, got me Wi-Fi access, took me to the library, got me transportation. She's the one who introduced me to the mayor.

"She had faith in me I didn't see at first. She said, 'You're a good kid.' I can go forward with my life and make the best of it. I know I can do it."

"It" will be either going to college to study business or go to a school for merchant seamen.

But first, Monday at 2 p.m., wearing the cap and gown, Oran will walk across the stage and accept his hard-won diploma, as a product of some social programs that work.

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Opinion

Frank Denton: Is Butler a solution that works?

By Frank Denton
Posted May 29, 2015 at 5:46 PM

A principle of learning organizations, as well as common sense, is that it's smarter, and a lot cheaper, to prevent problems than to repair them.

I'll grant you it's probably human, when someone mentions "crime," to immediately think of "police." So Mayor-elect Lenny Curry says one of his top priorities is to give Sheriff-elect Mike Williams 147 additional cops. Our recent crime wave and last week's report that we retain our distinction as Florida's murder capital reinforce that instinct.

But it also brings to mind Lucy in the chocolate factory. When Lucy and Ethel can't handle the non-stop flow of candies coming down the conveyor belt, you'd think they'd hire more Lucys (or probably more Ethels). But the other option would be to slow down the machine.

Of course, the candy company's goal is to produce and sell more candy, while ours should be to produce fewer criminals.

In her Times-Union column Thursday, Tonyaa Weathersbee wrote that the antidote to crime is more jobs through economic development in Northwest Jacksonville. But back up some more: To hold down a job, a person has to be able to read, do at least some math and have good work habits, including being able to participate in a team.

The first solution to crime is to grow more successful and complete human beings.

You've read here, more than either you or I would like, that Jacksonville's biggest problem is the American urban pathology: single, ill prepared parent, unsupportive or even toxic neighborhood, illiteracy, failure in school, drop out or suspension, street life - and on to the end of the line, early death or prison.

I propose that it would be vastly cheaper and more effective, as well as more humane, for the community to help develop successful people than to wait until they hurt someone then arrest, convict and incarcerate them for many years, without rehabilitation, until they can be released back in the community - as more efficient crooks.

Some people think it can't be done, and indeed, such salvation requires faith over a generation that some community efforts will work. In fact, after a half century of "social programs" starting with the Great Society, we know from the data that some things don't work - but that others do. As we understand what does work, we need to take it to scale, in coordination with other programs that work, and expect a transformation.

Within that context, our education, children and families reporter Tessa Duvall saw some remarkable success stories - and data - at the old Eugene J. Butler Middle School in a troubled neighborhood of Northwest Jacksonville and devoted four months of reporting to understand what was working there and how it might work in other schools.

I hope you read the first of her three-part series on the front page, but if you didn't, please go back and invest a little of your Sunday morning in an inspirational and important piece of journalism.

Follow the story over the next two days and connect to our multimedia coverage on Jacksonville.com, including videos of Duvall and of some of the students reading their powerful poetry. Participate in a live chat with Duvall at 10 a.m. Tuesday.

You'll get some deeply personal stories, and you'll see some young lives that are beginning to change, for the better.

You will see good progress on the front lines of the work toward the new Jacksonville.

"I'm not ready, at this point, to signal victory," schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti told Duvall. "But I am willing to say that we are on a shorter road to victory than we were just a year ago when it comes to the educational experience that takes place in the building at the old Butler school."

He plans to expand single-gender education, as an idea that works.

Duvall and her teammates, Denise Smith Amos and Rhema Thompson, and other T-U reporters will continue our commitment to powerful journalism about Jacksonville's children, our biggest asset and our biggest challenge. We welcome your reaction and ideas.

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Frank Denton: Surviving the urban pathology

By Frank Denton
Posted Jun 11, 2016 at 8:49 AM

I could be writing about Jeremiah Elijah Hill, the child-thug in his Facebook photo above who was sentenced to 40 years in prison for murder last week.

As I have before in this city's seemingly never-ending parade of young inner-city criminals, I would look to his background to try to understand how a 13-year-old could mindlessly, even blithely murder a man after a casual gun deal at a gas station.

I would point, again, to the urban pathology of poor or absent parenting, inert early-childhood education, a dearth of positive role models, failure in school and immersion in a culture of guns, crime and violence. The child already had an "extensive" criminal record.

I would look to his mother, who gave birth to him when she was 17 years old and now, at age 32, has 10 other children, the latest born two weeks ago. I would look past his father, who is serving 25 years in prison and hasn't even seen his son since the boy was an infant.

I would say Jeremiah Elijah Hill is another lost soul, and the new Jacksonville must look past him, too, and figure out how to treat the urban pathology that has become so frighteningly and tragically predictable in the old Jacksonville.

My head and my heart tell me to write about Jeremiah Hill and push for acknowledgement of the issue and community action, but my spirit, maybe like yours right now, needs the redemption of Claudius Anderson.

Claude, as he's known, also is a black male and, at 50, is roughly the age Jeremiah will be if he survives prison. Claude already has traversed the urban pathology and emerged on the other side.

Actually, he started out fine, with a good mother and stepfather who brought him from Trinidad and Tobago to New York City at age 8. "They put common sense in my head, but at the time I really didn't want to listen."

In adolescence, he dropped out of school and fell into the street culture - "fighting, assault, disorderly conduct, getting locked up. That's what you did in the neighborhood to get girls and stuff. I did a lot of stupidness when I was growing up. I couldn't stay out of jail."

At about age 18, Claude Anderson took his stupidness to Texas, "just messing around, looking for trouble. I sold drugs and whatnot. I got shot up in 1988, shot 12 times. I've still got a bullet by the brain and a bullet by the heart.

"I'm not a killer, and that's why I think I'm still alive. But a lot of people got hurt because of me."

Mothers rarely give up on their kids, and Anderson's mother, Catherine Murray, went down to Texas to retrieve the wounded son, take him back to New York and get him on Social Security disability. For the next 20 years, Anderson said, "I really didn't do anything. I was in and out of trouble those years.

"I tried to get back on track with school. I tried different programs, but they didn't help me like they do down here, at FSCJ. I was really scared of the GED. My mind wasn't in it."

So he fled again, in 2009, this time to Volusia County where he fell back into the dark side. "I got in trouble, I was selling drugs again, and I got locked up." He spent three years in a Florida prison.

Anderson clearly remembers his personal point of inflection. One day he was called out of his cell to take a phone call in an office, and he knew it had to be bad news - the death of his mother, he feared, because she had been in poor health. Instead, it was his mother on the phone, telling him his stepfather had died.

Somehow, the trauma of that moment, at middle age, deflated the stupidness.

"I just felt like I'm too old now," he said of his epiphany. "I can't do those things no more. I promised my momma, I won't have you stressed about me no more. I made a promise to myself and my mother that I wasn't going to stress anybody

anymore. I stressed all my loved ones.

"It seems I lived on the wrong side of the world, the wrong side of life, long enough. Everything I was doing was negative. I just changed my way of thinking. I just want to live, and I want the people around me to live."

When he got out of prison in 2014, on the advice of a friend, Anderson came to Jacksonville and, with his new attitude, decided to take on the GED he had so feared. He screwed up his courage and walked into FSCJ.

"Claude came to me off the street," said Edward Thomas Jr., an adjunct professor and academic tutor. "He came in and said, 'I'm really at my edge, about to give up, and I heard about you on the street.'

"He came in and listened to what I said, trusted me to help him get his GED. The young man came every day I was here. We went through his subjects together. He was always right there. It was a tribute to him and his dedication."

Anderson said, "Professor Thomas put it in me not to be scared of it. I had never seen algebra before in my life. When I dropped out of school, I was just doing fractions."

Thomas now has tutored him for more than a year. "He's worked really hard. It's one of the amazing student stories, because of how he worked and where he came from. A lot of people say they want to do this, but he really meant it. He proved it."

For the first time since 1982, Anderson also has a job, setting up equipment at EverBank Field, through the help of FSCJ and the state-funded Empowerment of Florida.

Thomas said Anderson no longer had the attitude of a criminal, a drug dealer. "To me, he's like this humble man. ... He was humble, the only word I can put with him. Something humbled him. Sometimes when you get humbled, it makes it easier to obtain what you need to obtain. He humbled himself. He'd say, 'Whatever, Mr. T, you show me.'

"That fire. I don't see that stopping."

Anderson, who had failed the math part of the GED twice before, laughs at himself now when he remembers going to FSCJ to check on the score of his third attempt. "When I went on the website and saw that green color," indicating he had passed, "I was downtown in the Rosa Parks bus terminal going crazy."

I asked Anderson if, finally, after all these years, he was proud of himself. "I didn't realize it at first," he said, "but when I went to graduation a couple of weeks ago ... man! I didn't believe it!"

Thomas met Anderson's mother at the graduation, "and to have this lady look at me, the look in her eyes. You can just tell the stuff she went through with Claude. She was so appreciative, so thankful. That helped me re-evaluate what God put me here for.

"She said, 'Claude, you're going to college! I'm holding you to it.' Seeing that in her eyes made me very emotional, very happy. I know she is the key behind what's pushing him."

Anderson does plan to go on to college, for a two-year program in environmental science, "so I can get a job as a water tech."

"Right now," he said, "I feel like there's nothing I can't learn. Whatever I want to learn, I can learn."

Claudius Anderson is very glad he found Jacksonville. "I give the whole Duval education [system], the job placement, the credit. Whoever they send you to, they going to show you how to do something. This is my home now. Duval County is where I'm going to be at the rest of my life.

"I can do anything I want now."

Including being a constructive part of the new Jacksonville.

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