

## Ceremony helps teenagers develop responsible, culturally conscious lives

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POMONA - Elders and mentors can culturally connect young people to ancestral traditions and ease the transition from childhood to adulthood.

This is the reasoning behind the rite-of-passage ceremony conducted by black educators, youth advocates and community activists for black Inland Valley high school seniors since 1996. The ceremony's goal is to help teens develop responsible, culturally conscious lives.

The 13th annual ceremony will be 4 p.m. Saturday at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Pomona. It is free and open to all black seniors in the region.

The program began from a casual conversation in 1996 between former Pomona Unified School District Teacher of the Year Victoria Rasshan, and Garey High School senior activist Secret Winbush.

Returning from a School Site Council conference in San Diego, the pair's talk focused on the need to help young blacks get in touch with their African roots and become informed adults,

Rasshan said.

"The rite of passage was Secret's idea," the Philadelphia School teacher added.

Victoria Rasshan's husband, Khalif Rasshan, a Pomona Alternative School teacher, and retired educator Sowah Aleem Rahmaan were both teaching at Garey High School in 1996.

Khalif and Victoria's son, Rasheed, was a Garey graduating senior with Winbush, Jordan Young, Dante Washington, Keyana Nelson and Rochelle Rhone. These students joined forces with other students at Pomona, Ganesha, Claremont, Montclair and Upland high schools.

This core formed the first group participating in the Africentric program featuring spoken words, historical segments, vocal music and African drumming, dancing and fashions. The ceremony is modeled after ones held at Cal Poly Pomona, Cal State Northridge and other universities.

"This is an opportunity for our kids to learn what the African in African-American means," Khalif said.

Rahmaan said the ceremony has the secondary purposes of saying farewell and good luck to seniors and telling them "We love you, support you and encourage you. We are your protectors and mentors. You are part of us and we are part of you."

Educators and elders seek to resolve the failure of adults to model good behavior for young

people.

"All people need guides, mentors, teachers," Khalif said. "Parents used to be more influential, but youth today have adopted different influences. Like peers, media, gangs, television, movies and music. Both parents and children need positive outside influences. Mentors fill the gap and transmit information, knowledge and correct thinking."

It takes more than parents to transform children into well-rounded and aware adults, Rahmaan said. Everyone can show concern for youth, regardless of one's station in life, he added.

Rasheed, 30, served as a long-term substitute teacher at Garey and Pomona high schools before becoming a videographer and project manager for Presentation Services, a Dallas-based international audio visual company. He is married to his Grambling College sweetheart, Alean, and they have a 10-month-old son.

He still remembers the rite of passage.

"It was an awesome end to a great high school experience," Rasheed said. "I look forward to passing on to my son those cultural traditions my parents and community elders instilled in me."

"I feel I am a culturally and ethnically aware man who is connected to the world and humanity," Rasheed continued. "My sense of self was shaped by my parents, other adults around them and my personal experiences."

In recent years, the Pomona Association of Black School Educators have joined the adult Rasshans and Rahmaan ceremony as ceremony sponsors and presenters.

Other educators and activists involved include Ed Taylor, Stephanie Butler, Emmett Terrell, Ernest Burries, Ethel Anumba, Pamala Mshana, Lashonne Mitchell, Calondra Jolly, Audrey Yarbrough, the Rev. William Tyler and Tommy Morrow.