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S.O.S. (Save Our Students)

One grieving mother seeks to raise awareness about a leading cause of death among Black male college students — suicide.

By — Chandra R. Thomas, cmaadmin (EDU)

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One grieving mother seeks to raise awareness about a leading cause of death among Black male college students — suicide.

Gina Smallwood always worried about whether her teenage son was wearing a seatbelt or having unprotected sex, but she was certainly never concerned about whether he was at high risk for depression.

After all, Kelvin Mikhail Smallwood-Jones was a dean's list student with a 4.0 grade point average on a full academic scholarship to one of the most respected historically Black colleges in the country. Prior to enrolling in Atlanta's Morehouse College in the fall of 2006, he was a football star and homecoming king at his Washington, D.C., area high school. A sophomore English major, Kelvin dabbled in photography and mentored at-risk youth in his free time. Last winter he was planning an elaborate birthday celebration and had been accepted into a prestigious summer internship program.

He never made it to either.

On Feb. 23, 2008 — less than two weeks before his 20th birthday — Kelvin shot himself in the head with his mother's gun on the deck of the

suburban Atlanta farmhouse that she bought to live closer to him while he was in college.

“Kelvin was an exceptional and amazing young man who had everything to live for,” says a teary-eyed Smallwood of her only child.

Kelvin’s story is not uncommon. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among American college students, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. In fact, a 2008 survey found that more than half of American college students have considered suicide at some point in their lives. The report is based on a University of Texas at Austin survey of 26,000 undergraduate and graduate students at 70 U.S. institutions. More than 5 percent of the students polled said they had attempted suicide.

“College students face many difficult challenges,” says Dr. Clare Xanthos, a health services research specialist at Morehouse School of Medicine. “Many times they’re away from home for the first time. They’re lonely and trying to maintain an academic schedule and maintain a social life.”

At High Risk

It turns out that Kelvin was at an elevated risk for suicide. Young Black male suicide rates have increased rapidly since the 1980s. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is now the third cause of death among African-American males between the ages of 15 and 24, behind homicide and accidental injury.

"I had no idea that my son was even at risk for suicide," Smallwood says. "If I had been aware, I would have been talking to him about this and asking the right questions."

Lack of awareness, she says, is a major problem. "It doesn't get mentioned on the news unless it's a famous person; so many people don't realize that suicide is a serious problem."

Kelvin had argued with his girlfriend hours before he had kicked in the door of Smallwood's locked bedroom door while she was away to get the .40-caliber pistol she had kept for protection. Mental health experts emphasize that such details are not nearly as relevant as the fact that the No. 1 cause of suicide for college students is untreated depression.

"The data suggest that 80 to 90 percent of people who commit suicide are suffering from clinical depression or another undiagnosed mental illness," says Dr. David Satcher, a former U.S. surgeon general who now serves as director of Morehouse School of Medicine's Center of Excellence on Health Disparities. "We tend to try to look for reasons that this sort of thing happens at a particular time, but invariably this is someone who was dealing with an undiagnosed mental disorder."

Smallwood says she doesn't believe her son sought counseling.

Xanthos, who last year authored a special report titled "The Secret Epidemic: Exploring the Mental Health Crisis Affecting Adolescent African-American Males," says an increase in Black male suicides is not surprising considering the "unique social and environmental stressors,

including racism,” they have to deal with. “The mental health profession needs to become more culturally sensitive to their needs and get out the message that it’s OK to get help and be vulnerable,” Xanthos adds.

Smallwood takes solace in two things. First, on the day of his death, Kelvin called her that morning just to say, “I love you.” And her loss now serves as a life-saving lesson for others. She has joined forces with the National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS) to launch the Kelvin Mikhail Suicide Awareness Campaign. Smallwood hopes it will bring more attention to suicide among college students and young Black males.

With money from Kelvin’s insurance policy, Smallwood has already taken her efforts to several historically Black colleges and universities in Atlanta; Charlotte, N.C.; and Washington, D.C. She has passed out informational fliers and spoken formally and informally to students at Kelvin’s former college. “We need to know that suicide is an issue in the Black community and on college campuses,” she says. “I’m trying to save lives.”

Her undertaking falls in line with the work that NOPCAS has committed to doing since it was established in 1998.

“We work with HBCUs and help train faculty, staff and students on how to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression and suicide,” explains CEO Donna Barnes, who co-founded the organization after her 20-year-old son Marc, a student at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, drove his car into a river in 1990. “Right now, the schools aren’t

doing as much as they need to in regards to counseling and awareness, but they are interested in doing more and that is promising.”

Smallwood hopes her actions will encourage parents, educators and members of all communities to better educate themselves on the symptoms of depression and mental illness.

“Ask your kids, ‘how are you doing, what’s going on in your life, do you ever feel hopeless,’” advises Smallwood. “Don’t beat around the bush. If you don’t talk about this, you might find yourself in the same situation that I’m in.”

— *Chandra R. Thomas is a 2007-2008 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow.*

From ‘The Secret Epidemic’

- During 1980-1995, the suicide rate for adolescent Black males ages 15-19 increased from 5.6 to 13.8 per 100,000 of the population. While adolescent Black males historically have had lower suicide rates than adolescent White American males, suicide is now becoming equally or more prevalent among African-Americans.
- Black males ages 15-19 die from homicide at 46 times the rate of their White counterparts. Suicide Warning Signs: Appearing depressed or sad
Expressing hopelessness
Withdrawing from family and friends
Sleeping too much or too little
Gaining or losing a significant amount of weight
Writing notes or poems about suicide or death
Acting compulsively

Losing interest in most activities Giving away prized possessions Acting irrationally Being preoccupied with death or dying Behaving recklessly A dramatic change in personal appearance or personality Performing poorly at work or in school Abusing alcohol or drugs Inability to concentrate Source: Suicide.org Resources:

- For more information on the Kelvin Mikhail Suicide Awareness Campaign, visit www.kelvin-mikhail.info.
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255), is a 24-hour, toll-free suicide prevention service. Calls are routed to the closest possible crisis center in the caller's area.

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