

# A School For Urban Boys



STAN SIMPSON

**R**abbi Noach Kosofsky makes no apologies for running an independent school for Jewish boys and girls in Longmeadow, Mass., for the last 25 years. Knowledge of culture and self is an educational imperative in a world that can treat Jews with contempt and disdain.

"If these students went to a regular public school, they would be learning nothing about their culture, nothing about their history and their unique qualities that can help them make a difference in the world," said the rabbi, principal of Yeshiva Academy.

When Da'shone Hughey, a former Bloomfield resident, approached Kosofsky last year about a similar concept, but tailored to boys living in the city, Kosofsky was intrigued. He joined eight others in becoming the board of directors for the proposed Leadership Prep Academy for Young Men. The independent school would be located in Greater Hartford and serve, initially, 50 city high school students. The school is looking to raise more than \$700,000.

"This school should not just be about academics," Kosofsky said. "The big picture and overarching goal is that you're taking youth that may come from a certain culture and share a certain history and making them have pride in who they are as people and what their culture brings to the world."

Hughey, a former dean of students at a Springfield charter school, has two children and raised his son Da'shone as a single father. The son was recognized in 2002 as one of Connecticut's top scholar-athletes, a captain of the Bloomfield High basketball team who maintained a 3.6 grade-point average and was ranked ninth in his senior class. The son graduated from Morehouse College and is now a Wall Street investor.

The father, a tailored-suit-wearing strapping 44-year-old former Bloomfield High basketball standout, says the principles he used in raising his son would be the foundation for the curriculum at his proposed academy. Although the students will learn the requisite core subjects — math, English, science — the plan is to instill plenty of lessons about leadership, cultural history, confidence and personal appearance.

A school designed specifically for urban boys, particularly African American boys, is worth trying. There are successful ones in Chicago and New York. Teaching about manhood, as well as math, would be of tremendous benefit.

At the root of urban dysfunction — violence, poverty, illiteracy — is the lack of a father or positive male role model. If we can get these boys connected to positive men on a regular basis, it would significantly slow this cycle of despair.

Seventy-two percent of black males grow up in a home with a single mother. The high school dropout rate for black males is 70 percent. One third of black males will spend at least some time in prison. The suicide rate for black men has doubled since 1980. This is a crisis that would not be tolerated if it were happening to any other population.

"Once you start attacking the ills of society when it comes to our urban males, you'll see a lot of the violent crimes stop because they'll take pride in their community," said Hartford native Keith Knight, a retired Hartford police detective and Leadership Academy board member.

The lack of a strong male presence leads the boys to become enamored of gangsters and gang bangers.

"They want to be Gotti. They want to be Capone. They want to be all these people that they're not," Hughey said. "We try and talk about who you are and how you see yourself."

Here's one image: A young man overcomes his circumstances through education and respect for self — and others.

*Stan Simpson's column appears on Wednesdays and Saturdays. He can be heard live Saturday on WTIC NewsTalk 1080 from 5:30 a.m. to 10 a.m.*