

# the **Stand** south side news

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Syracuse, NY

WINTER 2014-15 Issue 39 FREE

## DAVID HILLS

Outreach worker finds redemption from past in role to end violence

## Kirk Park Gets A Lift

Outdoor classroom created for environmental lessons

## promise zone

City applies for federal program to help South and Southwest sides

Find out what you can do before a natural disaster

## Getting prepared

## FASHION DREAMS



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IN KEEPING WITH COMMUNITY STANDARDS.**COMMUNITY** | Do you know what to do in the event of a natural disaster? Here's a guide to keep you prepared for whatever trouble the Syracuse weather might bring.**COMMUNITY** | In an effort to develop the South and Southwest sides of Syracuse, city officials have applied for a "Promise Zone" designation from the federal government.**BUSINESS** | Two local designers are making a difference. Tommi Billingsley wants women to love themselves in FLYGIRLSHHH clothes. Ron Funderburg designs mostly for men.**FEATURES** | David Hills is an outreach worker with S.N.U.G. — guns spelled backward. After serving prison time himself for a shooting, he now strives to stop people from killing.**COMMUNITY** | Changes at Kirk Park have turned it into a place where students can learn about Onondaga Creek in the newly built "outdoor classroom" and get a great view, too.**ENTERTAINMENT** | Blowin' in the Wind blends light, sound and personality among its mix of family and friends on stage.**COMMUNITY** | After going dormant last fall, the Dunbar Association's doors are flung open once more, with activities and services for all ages.

■ Cover photography of David Hills by Lateshia Beachum

## CALENDAR | WINTER

**What:** Photo Exhibit: "Question Bridge: Black Males"**When/where:** Continues through Dec. 13: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays**Where:** Community Folk Art Center, 805 E. Genesee St.**Cost:** Admission is free and open to the public**Details:** "Question Bridge: Black Males" is a transmedia project created by artists Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas. It facilitates a dialogue between a critical mass of black men from diverse backgrounds. The center will also feature a "Question Bridge Syracuse: The Work of Ellen Blalock."**More Info.:** Call (315) 442-2230 or visit [communityfolkartcenter.org](http://communityfolkartcenter.org)**What:** "The Color Purple"**When:** Continues through Dec. 20: 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, Dec. 6, 13 and 20; 7:30 p.m. Dec. 10, 11, 17 and 18; 8 p.m. Dec. 12 and 19**Where:** Red House Arts Center, 201 S. West St.**Cost:** \$15-\$30**Details:** Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Alice Walker, this musical tells the story of a woman who manages to triumph over adversity and find her own voice through the power of love.**More Info:** Call (315) 362-2785 or visit [theredhouse.org](http://theredhouse.org)**What:** 30th Annual MLK Celebration**When:** Doors open at 4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015**Where:** Carrier Dome**Cost:** Evening program, free and open to the public. Dinner tables \$300 or individual tickets \$30 for the general public.**Details:** The evening program, which will include the presentation of the 2015 Unsung Hero Awards, music by a community choir and entertainment by student performers, begins at 5:30 p.m. Dinner precedes the program at 4:30 p.m. Keynote speaker is NPR host and author Michele Norris.**More Info.:** For dinner tickets, contact Ginny Yerdon at Hendricks Chapel at (315) 443-5044 or [gverdon@syr.edu](mailto:gverdon@syr.edu)



Now that it's the holiday season, we look forward to time with family, eating massive amounts of food and making a New Year's resolution.

We hope that anyone who has thought about getting involved with The Stand in the past will resolve to make 2015 the year to get involved.

We will hold a general interest meeting to update residents about The South Side Newspaper Project, hear story ideas and share how residents can become paid contributors to The Stand. The mission of The South Side Newspaper Project has always been to act as the voice of the community in an effort to start a community conversation. For this we invite residents to share their stories.

You may attend our general interest meeting and simply share a story idea or we welcome you to submit your own written piece. For any community member who contributes an article that is published, we pay \$25 and we will help you with composition and editing.

Or, instead of taking on the role of reporter, there are other ways to support this project. As a nonprofit, The Stand is always working to recruit new advertisers. We have opportunities to run ads in our print issues. Local businesses or groups looking to promote an upcoming event also can run ads online and even in our monthly eNewsletter. Our rates are reasonable — beginning at just \$25 for a business card-size ad up to \$350 for a full-page, full-color ad. All ad sales cover our printing costs and help pay our community correspondents.

For now, turn the page and enjoy all of the local stories in this winter issue. And consider this idea as your New Year's resolution: Take a stand and support your local paper.

Ashley Kang



## UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan. 14 & 17

### General Interest meeting

The Stand will hold two general interest meetings for residents to learn more about the paper and how to get involved.

Each session will provide an opportunity to submit story ideas to the director, ask questions and learn how to become a paid contributor.

**When:** 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 14, and again at 10 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 17

**Where:** South Side Communication Center at 2331 S. Salina St.

**Contact:**  
ashley@mysouthsidestand.com  
or (315) 882-1054



### MEET OUR NEWEST BOARD MEMBER: DALE HARP

Dale Harp joined The Stand as a board member this past month but has been connected with the publication since 2013. He was first featured in The Stand's pages for being a local, published author of "The Day My Dawgs Ran," a book he wrote while incarcerated. He wanted to share his personal stories about going down the wrong path as a way to encourage youth to make better choices. He next participated in The Stand's recent summerlong storytelling series From Where We Stand. Now he is eager to be further involved as a board member. Harp is also a volunteer at the Mary Nelson Youth Center, Faith Hope Community Center and member of Citizen Action of NY.

## HOW TO GET READY

## 3DayOK

Through a public awareness campaign, 3DayOK will educate Onondaga County residents to be self-reliant during the first three days of a large-scale event: [www.redcross.org/ny/syracuse/3davok](http://www.redcross.org/ny/syracuse/3davok)

## Citizen Preparedness Corps Training

Online training is offered to residents so they have the resources to prepare for any type of disaster: [prepare.ny.gov/training-events](https://prepare.ny.gov/training-events)

## Ready

[www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)

## Listo (Spanish version)

[www.ready.gov/es](http://www.ready.gov/es)

## WANT TO HOST?

**Preparedness training sessions** can be arranged locally. If you are interested in hosting a Citizen Preparedness Training session, visit: [www.dhses.ny.gov/aware-prepare/nysprepare/registration/training-request.cfm](http://www.dhses.ny.gov/aware-prepare/nysprepare/registration/training-request.cfm)

# GETTING PREPARED

***Gather essential items now so you're ready if a natural disaster strikes***



> With New York state ranking No. 4 in natural disasters, it's good to always have a kit ready. | Tajuana Cerutti, Staff Photo

By | Tajuana Cerutti  
*The Stand* board member

With winter upon us, the United Way shares tips on how you can make a plan to stay safe

Members of The Stand's Board of Directors recently attended information sessions to help them understand what they can do to be prepared in the event of an emergency, specifically a natural disaster. Natural disasters often result in the disruption of everyday life and include inaccessibility to safe environments, transportation, health care, fresh food, clean water and family members for a certain amount of time.

To help area residents, United Way of Central New York was able to offer disaster preparedness education to communities throughout the region after receiving a 10-month grant. Attendees were able to walk away with one of 300 emergency starter kits for each family represented, put together and donated by Keller Williams Realty and volunteers.

Shavel Edwards, volunteer coordinator with the Community Impact Division from United Way, led the charge in visiting counties to provide information and resources to the community about preparedness.

Edwards shared insight that is beneficial to individuals who were not able to attend any of the sessions.

Why does United Way of CNY think it is important to offer emergency preparedness education to the communities throughout the region?

**Edwards:** “It is important because New York state ranks No. 4 on the list of natural disasters within the last 50 years throughout the nation. People think that we are only affected by snowstorms and maybe the occasional flooding, but we’re actually affected by snowstorms, ice storms, flooding, hurricanes and tornadoes as a state. It’s important for us to [help prepare our communities] and make them aware of the disasters that may affect our area.”

With events like the flooding in Oneida last year, how likely is it that natural disasters like that will occur in Syracuse? It seems like we're in an area where similar events aren't that frequent.

**Edwards:** “A disaster is not planned. It’s unexpected. The best thing we can do is plan for the unexpected and prepare. Now that we know that we’re No. 4, the best thing we can do is prepare. Just like we prepare for snowstorms since we’re No. 1 in the nation in response to snow, when we get a foot of snow, we can still function. Other cities may get an inch of snow and it shuts down the whole city, so we can use [those] same tactics.”



What would you say are the most important things for families to do to prepare for a natural disaster?

**Edwards:** “One thing to do is to have a kit ready. [The kit should contain] supplies just in case [families] have to leave their home in an emergency. A kit includes some personal items, depending on the time of the year. Items can be a blanket, cash on hand (if there is a disaster, people may not be able to get to an ATM). They should have items ready for children, especially for infants like diapers and formula. Extra medication [should be on hand], and also nonperishable food and water should be in the kit. [Those] are the most important things.

“The second thing is to have a plan of action. Families may not be together at the time of a disaster. [Families] need to have a plan for where [they] are going to meet, and who [they] are going to call and contact to notify that everyone is OK. Also, [include how you will look] out for pets and animals as far as a plan of action. Who is going to pick up your child if you cannot make it? If they are stuck at school and you cannot get to your child, who is a person that they can contact?

“More specifically at home, if something happens in your home, where is your meeting place going to be? If something happens, so no one is running back into the home to try to save someone that may be outside, it’s good to have a safe meeting place outside the home where everyone can go.

“Lastly, be informed. There are a number of different websites that you can look at. There’s FEMA’s ready.gov website, and also locally, prepare.ny.gov, the statewide governor’s site. [Both] have information on how you can be prepared.”

What advice can you offer Syracusans when it comes to preparing for emergencies?

**Edwards:** “On the ready.gov FEMA site, they can mail you free information. You can go to the library and get free information, and you can also go on their website and get information for kids. It doesn’t cost that much to be informed. It just takes time to educate yourself.”



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### Learn more.

To find out what Say Yes to Education means for you and your family, go to [sayyessyracuse.org](http://sayyessyracuse.org) or call 315.443.4260.



## THE STAND IS ONLINE

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# PROMISED LAND

*Federal program could give South and Southwest sides help they need*



> The Southwest Community Center is a hub for some important meetings about the city's future. | Molly Smith, Staff Photo

By | Molly Smith  
*Urban Affairs reporter*

If designated a **Promise Zone**, it would be among only 20 in the nation with that name

City officials began applying last month to a federal program that would designate parts of Syracuse's South and Southwest sides as a "Promise Zone." The distinction would give those areas preference for certain federal programs for a 10-year period, according to the city's director of research, Janet Burke.

"It would make us more eligible for tax credits, jobs, and job readiness and training programs," Burke said. "The goal is to get all people out of poverty and into affordable housing, get jobs and continue education."

The Promise Zone program is run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. President Barack Obama announced in his 2013 State of the Union Address that he would designate 20 Promise Zones nationwide in high-poverty urban, rural and Native American tribal communities. Those selected

would be assigned a federal liaison and up to five AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers to work with federal agencies, coordinate key stakeholders, and facilitate programs that address the community's needs.

Burke presented the idea for the Syracuse Promise Zone before the Common Council in November. Councilor Khalid Bey oversees the city's 4th District that encompasses the proposed zone. He expressed concern that the program, if Syracuse's application succeeds, would include the right decision makers. He said he wants to ensure that the program would benefit people who need it most.

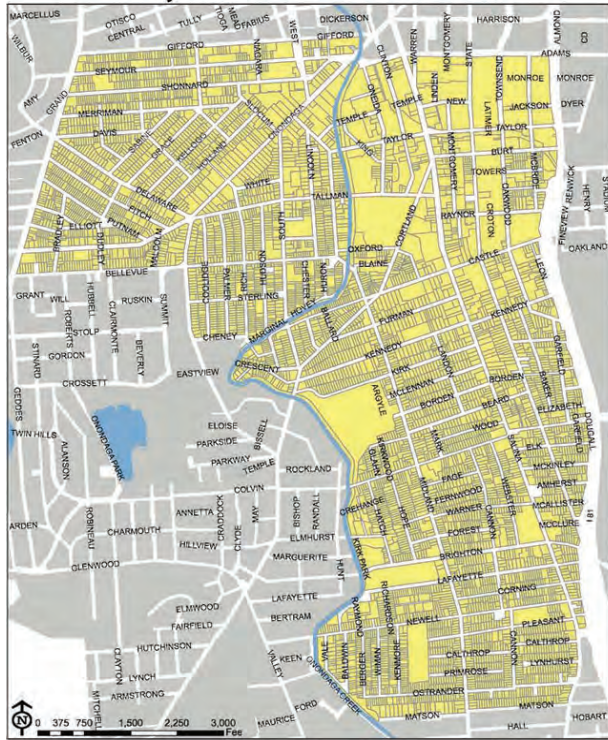
"Granted that we are successful at acquiring the distinction and the right people are involved with its administration, the value of job training and economic development opportunity cannot be overstated," Bey said.

The first Promise Zones were announced earlier this year in a ceremony at the White House. The government said it would accept a second round of applications until Nov. 21 — the deadline for which Syracuse officials said they would apply.

Burke said her office is arranging the official applica-



## Syracuse Promise Zone



> This map shows the section of Syracuse's South and Southwest sides that would be part of the Promise Zone. | Courtesy of the Common Council

tion, but the main coordinator behind the process is the city's Department of Neighborhood and Business Development. Commissioner Paul Driscoll said the application has six main criteria aimed at improving general welfare in the South and Southwest sides of Syracuse.

"We're looking for work force development, improving educational opportunities, health and wellness, reducing violent crimes, expanding affordable housing, and increasing economic activity," Driscoll said. "We're trying to describe what's going on in the South and Southwest sides of the city along those six lines."

Driscoll said that this area is defined as a "distressed community," as opposed to being classified as "stable" or "transitional," and therefore requires more financial and personal investment. While being designated as a Promise Zone does not automatically guarantee additional

funding, Driscoll said he hopes the title will help.

"It's a promise of getting extra attention," he said.

"Will the designation increase funding? It's very vague."

While Driscoll said he is unsure of the potential long-term advantages of the distinction, he said he foresees the immediate benefit of forcing the city to inventory the activity going on in those areas to address the topics. He listed several groups he said he planned to involve in the process: the Syracuse City School District and Say Yes for educational improvements; Home Head-Quarters and the Greater Syracuse Land Bank to address affordable housing; and CenterState CEO, a Syracuse-based business leadership organization, to assist with economic development.

All of these parties would convene at the Southwest Community Center at 401 South Ave., which Driscoll refers to as the "symbolic and geographic hub" of the efforts. The Syracuse Model Neighborhood Facility, a nonprofit community resource network, is run out of the center and has already become involved with the Promise Zone application.

"The success depends on all partners coming together as more of a wraparound resource," said Valerie Hill, director of community services for the neighborhood group. "We are here to help identify the youth and families that need help in those areas to bring them together with the community."

Hill said the building is a "great asset" to the project in bringing people together. She said she believes education is the area with the most room for improvement.

"There's a big gap among kids at the center going to city schools," she said.

To address educational improvements, Pat Driscoll, director of operations for Say Yes, described the necessary planning and implementation phases of the Promise Zone. He stressed that families need to have better access to resources already in place to truly reap the benefits of the distinction.

"The focus area for education is creating a collaboration of different agencies to support educational initiatives," Driscoll said. "We have to ensure the supports are working."

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## FASHION STATEMENT

Coco Chanel, who was a French fashion designer and founder of the Chanel brand, once stated:

“Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.”

# FASHION DREAMS

*Ron Funderburg and Tommi Billingsley have created their own brands*



> Ron Funderburg is the founder of Unico Re' clothing line, designed mainly for men. | Tamara Reese, Staff Photo

By | Tamara Reese  
*Community correspondent*

**Two local designers use their personal styles to instill confidence in others, empower them**

**E**ver thought about making clothes, but were scared of what people might think of the style? I would say go for it. Be a fashion designer!

There are many people in Syracuse who make clothes, and it started with a dream and conquering their vision. Two people in particular, Ron Funderburg and Tommi Billingsley, both Syracuse natives, are designers making their mark with appealing clothes that are trending in this town. These two have different bold styles for men and women of all ages and sizes to bring individuality and self-assurance to people who wear their designs.

Tommi Billingsley, founder of Flygirlshhh, is not only a fashion designer. She also is one of the most humble women I know. Tommi's brand started as an idea in April 2013 and launched into full motion by May 2013.

Ever since Flygirlshhh surfaced, she has been a community icon. Her line features dresses, T-shirts, shorts, jewelry and other designs for women. Soon customers can purchase shoes as well.

Tommi's reason for creating Flygirlshhh is because

she wants all women to look great and love themselves, especially those with low self-esteem.

Tommi is dedicated to bringing back humble confidence in women by helping those who feel they don't know how to dress. She wants them to be able to pick out an outfit and feel like a queen.

Even if women don't always feel like they are fly — meaning feeling wonderful about their appearance — she wants to give ladies the opportunity to look and feel fly inside and out.

“Flygirlshhh is a sisterhood and lifestyle, not just a clothing line,” Tommi said.

At first this talented designer didn't think she would make a great impact, but she has stayed consistent and true to herself and continues to make women feel beautiful and confident in her community. The clothing line Tommi created is for all women of all sizes.

Tommi wants not only women in Syracuse to wear her products, but also women all over the world.

Advice Tommi wants to share to those who are considering being fashion designers is to have a plan and put that plan into action.

She advises: “Find out your market, know exactly what it is you want to present, as well as have love and passion for your craft.”



Even with discouraging times, she said people have to have faith and believe in themselves.

God will lead you in the right direction," she added. "It will not be easy, but keep going and never give up."

Her intentions are to make women know that no matter what society thinks of your color or size, all women are fly.

"I am not my clothes," she said. "I am not my hair. I am me. A mother who is loving, caring, compassionate, trustworthy and works hard."

She is and always will be a fly girl.

Another great native Syracuse fashion designer is Ron Funderburg, entrepreneur/CEO of Unico Re' clothing, established in 2009. The name means unique king.

Early on, Ron's mother noticed his talents with arts and crafts and his love for fashion. She encouraged him to follow his passion.

He did.

Ron started in Syracuse by designing mainly for men — elegant, urban and casual clothes, such as customized jackets and T-shirts. He is now pushing his brand not only in Syracuse but also by networking his creations in other countries.

"I'd like to build my own empire with music and fashion and self-to-self networking," he said in a 2011 article featured on Syracuse.com.

This dream still exists today.

In 2011 he also completed an internship with Bad

Boy Records, where he learned from his mentor and celebrity Sean Combs that you have to learn everything for yourself and not expect anyone to do things for you.

"I learned from a great teacher that gave me the ability to teach others wanting to do the same thing," Ron said.

***"I am me."***

**— Tommi Billingsley**

The best advice Ron can give anyone who wants to be a fashion designer is to do whatever it is you want to do.

He also has a lot of community support because of his hard work. He has organized many fashion shows.

Ron not only creates fashions, but he also is a motivational speaker. He speaks to youth as a positive male role model in a community that is plagued with violence. His influence gives young men and youth hope that they can do what they want to do and stay out of trouble.

This unique king has made his mark, and there is so much more to come.



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**SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 2015  
CARRIER DOME, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
KEYNOTE SPEAKER MICHELE NORRIS**

National Public Radio Special Correspondent and Creator of the Race Card Project

### COMMUNITY DINNER

Doors open at 4 p.m.  
Dinner served at 4:30 p.m.  
Tickets are \$30 for general public,  
available starting December 1.  
Call 443-5044 to order.



### EVENING PROGRAM

Begins at 5:30 p.m. and includes  
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> S.N.U.G. community outreach worker David Hills is seated at Simone's Soul Food, which he operates with his mother, Wanda Adair. | Lateshia Beachum, Staff Photo

By | Lateshia Beachum  
*Urban Affairs reporter*

David Hills overcame a lot to be in the position he is in now, helping to defuse violent situations

A few weeks ago, two men ready to end each other's life called a truce over a mediated meal. They'd exchanged bullets before trading words: One had put bullet holes in the van of the other. One had shot at the other several times.

"These guys are killers, literally. We know that they have bodies underneath their belts. But, they were going at each other's heads, and we interrupted that," said David Hills, one of the mediators in the situation who detailed the negotiation that started with individual talks to the men.

"I know when a person wants to reach out, sit down and wants to squash something. I can sense it. You can

feel it if you've been there. They know that I have their best interest at heart," he said, nodding his head, affirming his own words and the truth he believes they hold.

### A NEW BEGINNING

For over a month, Hills, 37, has worked with the Southwest Community Center as a community outreach worker as part of its S.N.U.G. program — "guns" spelled backward. Part of the group's mission is to decrease gun-related violence in the Syracuse area. The program is part of New York state's Cure Violence program that seeks to stop violence by treating it like a disease.

Unlike with these two men, Hills didn't have someone to intervene in the two incidents that led to his being sentenced to 7½ to 15 years in prison for gun possession and assault as a teenager. He had shot at a man who said derogatory words to his mother; two weeks later, he was involved in a shootout.



"Somebody got hit. Somebody pointed me out and said I did it," Hills said recently as he looked out the window near his table at Simone's Soul Food, the restaurant he runs with his mother.

"This is the typical story, too, of a lot of young men, some women," he said of his past. "The story's complex."

Hills is right when he says the story's all too familiar for many young black men who come from neighborhoods like the South Side. One in three black males is expected to go to prison in his lifetime, according to the Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group that champions prison reform, examines racial disparities in sentencing, and advocates for alternatives to incarceration. Moreover, black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated compared with white men, according to a September 2013 report by the Pew Research Center that examined incarceration rates. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 60 percent of black men in prison were 39 and younger, as was Hills.

### DOING HIS TIME

"I went to prison as a child. I was young," said Hills, who recalls being a ninth-grader who once took a gun to school in hopes of targeting a foe.

He told his story around deliveries for Simone's on a Thursday afternoon, excitement in his eyes while noting that he was "best in motion" behind the wheel of his silver SUV.

As he waited at a stoplight next to Galaxy Convenience store, a man in a black coat at the corner of South Avenue and Tallman Street happily threw up one of his hands to acknowledge Hills. Hills honked back, rolling down his window as the man approached.

"What up?" he asked. "I'm chillin', baby," Hills said in response after being asked the same question, sharing familiar laughter before the light turned green.

For the first few years of his sentence, Hills was chilling to the same tune that led him to prison. "I was still young, using drugs. I'm in there smoking weed, stuff like that," he said, almost in disbelief, his left hand on his steering wheel as the thumb and pointer finger of his right stroked his full, clean-shaven beard.

"It's like it's a jungle on the outside. When you go to prison, it's that same jungle just different faces, same routine, the same everything. [...] Everything that's out here that happens in the street life, it happens in prison. From drugs to you name it; it's in the prison," he said.

Phillip White, 48, was a former inmate with Hills who served more than 26 years for what he called "The Big M." He did not think much of Hills, his fellow inmate.

"He was a young guy who thought that he was real slick. And, basically anybody that he encountered, he looked at as a resource to further his own gains," White said in a phone interview.

White, who is now free and works as a mentor in the Bronx, was doing legal work at Woodbourne Correc-

tional Facility when he first met Hills around 2000 while they were both incarcerated. "He needed some legal work done with his direct appeal. He approached me as if he wanted to trade some drugs for the service of me doing his legal work. Personally, I was insulted. I didn't feel that he was placing a priority on his own freedom to attempt to pay me in that manner," White said.

White said he tried everything in his power to show Hills all the negative sides of his personality so he wouldn't have to be bothered with him because he felt Hills lacked integrity. But Hills was a little more persistent than White had anticipated. "He just seemed like he wanted to be around me," White said. "Once I took the time to talk to him, I felt like there was something in him that was redeemable."

With strong influences like White, Hills said he was ready to make a change in his life and work on his education. "I used to stand in the prison yard. I'd sit back listening to some of these guys talk. I used to be mesmerized off the words they were using, the way their sentences were well put together. I would be moved by that. I could barely read and write. So, to hear guys speaking like that, I was in awe. I became interested; I wanted to learn more. I began to realize how much I didn't know," he said.

"You know, when you're young and you're in the streets, you think you're a man taking care of yourself. You make a little money; you start to feel like a man. But the reality of it is that when I was put under those circumstances, I realized that I was lost."

As their friendship grew, White started assigning books for Hills to read such as "Manchild in the Promised Land" by Claude Brown, "Native Son" by Richard Wright and "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" by Paulo Freire.

"I saw that his level of comprehension and literacy was somewhat lacking, but I never criticized him because I found myself in these types of situations regularly," said White, who always had an affinity for academics.

"Once I saw where he was, as opposed to us sitting down joking and laughing, I started making time for us to sit down and study. I started giving him assignments, checking his assignments, going over things with him, making him read out loud. I would read out loud to him, and then have him read the same paragraph back to me."

### GROWING THROUGH EDUCATION

Hills credits White with helping him achieve literacy, which eventually led to Hills earning his GED.

"I acquired a theology degree. I attended Bard College. I learned a second language (sign language) and taught it. I taught men how to read and write, which meant I was a teacher's aide. I was an HIV and AIDS peer counselor. I learned and taught real estate," Hills said. "I was taking advantage of every program they offered. I wanted everything."

## EDUCATING INMATES

**Current data** support the efforts being made to increase education and training in the prison system.

According to a **2014 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics**, 77 percent of the prisoners in its sample study were arrested for a new crime within five years of their release.

However, in a **2013 collaborative study between the RAND Corporation and the Department of Justice**, prisoners in education programs were less likely to return to prison.

### MORE ABOUT S.N.U.G.

If you would like more information about the S.N.U.G. program, contact Raheem Mack, director of Syracuse's Cure Violence initiative: (315) 671-5816

## STOP BY SIMONE'S

Simone's Soul Food is open the following days and times:

### Location:

686 South Ave.

### Thursday-Saturday

8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

### Sunday

11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

### Phone:

(315) 760-0080

*Continued from Page 11*

After being separated and housed in different locations, Hills and White kept in contact through letters and through Hills' family, who acknowledged White's role in helping Hills become literate and change his life. White admired Hills' large family.

"He empathized with me to a point because the majority of my family had passed away during our experience, and that's something that I shared with him. Him being the caring, empathetic individual that he is, he shared his family with me," White said of Hills, whom he now regards as a brother he speaks to several times a week.

"His whole value set seemed to change before my eyes. It came to a point where I actually began to admire him," he said of his friend.

### RELATIONSHIP/COURTSHIP

An older inmate who lived across the hall from Hills had noticed the changes. He and Hills had built a bond over laughter and shared family experiences. The older inmate even introduced Hills to his daughter, Letisha S. Johnson, something that isn't common in prison, according to Hills.

"In prison, there are rules. It's not good to play with a person's food or their family. Certain lines you just don't cross. There's no staring at a person's family. There's definitely no talking to or speaking to a person's family unless a person opens that door or gives you permission," he said as he headed to his house after making his delivery, ready to show some of his bodybuilding pictures.

Hills asked the older inmate about his visitor. Before Hills was able to explain that his inquiry had no deeper

meaning, the man had told his daughter that Hills had asked about her. A few days later, Hills was given the green light to write Johnson.

Johnson, 41, a registered LPN at Loretto, laughed when she recalled her first impression of Hills. "Wow! Nice," she said, musing on her attraction to him. "I thought he was a very nice-looking man. He has very nice eyes, which attracted me to him first. Just the way he spoke in the setting that we did meet. For somebody to speak like that, that attracted me to him as well."

In his first letter to Johnson, Hills included two pictures of himself: a "regular picture" and a shirtless picture to show off his frame from the bodybuilding he was doing. "I didn't have to send that type of picture," he said, chuckling at his own cockiness. "But, I wanted to figure out, 'How can I win her over?'"

Johnson, too, laughed at his first contact with her. "I liked it, but I did say that he was a show-off."

After about two weeks, Johnson began making visits to see Hills every other weekend, or when she would have a weekend off.

She had just ended a relationship, but said she thought their budding romance was mutually beneficial.

"He needed me to be supportive," she said, "and I needed the attention from him."

The two continued their romance for three years through letters, phone calls and frequent visits until the day Hills was released in 2006, a day he said was almost as beautiful as his wedding day to Johnson in 2008.

"I was actually emotional that day. I wanted to leave, of course. But it was like, I'm leaving behind guys I love, I hold dear," he said. "I met some friends in prison."

After Hills was released, he was eager to get started



> David Hills sets out to deliver meals for Simone's Soul Food restaurant. | Lateshia Beachum, Staff Photo



on the goals he had set for himself while he was in prison. “Everything I used to sit down, write, and talk to my wife about on the visits, everything we spoke about came to fruition. Honest to God,” he said, sitting outside of his home in his car, looking through bodybuilding and family pictures of himself when he was first released.

### GIVING BACK

Hills had a difficult time adjusting to the new technology that had developed in his 10 years out of the workforce, Johnson said. But he persevered, opening up a restaurant for his mother, a lifelong dream of hers, and helping others with his counseling.

Johnson isn’t surprised that her “determined” husband is doing what he told her he would do on their visits. “It’s something that he’s always wanted to do. Even being incarcerated, he’s always talked about doing for the community. He always said he wanted to be a philanthropist,” she said.

Raheem Mack, director of Syracuse’s Cure Violence initiative, said Hills brings a unique quality to his work as community outreach worker. “This job isn’t a typical 9-5 job,” Mack said. “The community has an outburst of shootings and violence, and they don’t care what time it is. If there’s an issue and David has a direct contact to that issue or to that community, David is the type of person to say, ‘Hey, I’m on my way to give him another solution.’”

Hills said that he strongly believes in preventing violence so that other

people won’t have to travel down the path that he took. “The reason why I took the S.N.U.G. job is because I’ve been there, I’ve done it, and I seriously don’t want to see guys go through that,” he said.

Hills’ own education could be an example for the rehabilitative efforts that many are pushing across the country, including New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Earlier this year, Cuomo said he would like to provide free college education to inmates to reduce recidivism and to spend less on incarcerating its population. Cuomo argued that education leads to more opportunities, and more opportunities mean fewer in prison.

The only place that Hills returned on that Thursday afternoon was to the parking lot of his mother’s restaurant, fashioned from Johnson’s middle name, Simone.

After wrapping up his responsibilities there, he was headed to a S.N.U.G. meeting.

His phone rang several times. They were calls about the pending meeting, and he listened intently, responding with the respect a soldier gives his lieutenant.

Hills believes his journey isn’t over. His next moves include getting back into bodybuilding shape, becoming a real estate mogul and expanding Simone’s.

“I want to succeed and exceed. So, we can’t stop here now. Don’t think that this is where it ends,” he said.

David Hills is best in motion.

## SIMONE’S SOUL FOOD

Wanda Adair has a relationship with food that is as deep as her famous three-cheese macaroni pan in the kitchen of Simone’s Soul Food.

The 58-year-old and her son, David Hills, have been the operators of Simone’s for more than a year. The restaurant, named after Hills’ wife, Letisha Simone Johnson, has been welcomed by the Syracuse community with open arms and hungry stomachs.

“We’ve had overwhelming support from the community, all nationalities,” Adair said.

Adair’s restaurant is just a larger building to help her feed the South Side. “I was running out of my kitchen for seven, eight years,” she said.

The former Hutchings Psychiatric Center food service worker said she’s had a part-time job at most every soul food restaurant ever opened in Syracuse. “I can say I actually learned some things from working in those restaurants,” she said.

But Adair credits much of what she knows to her late mother, who was a Mobile, Alabama, native. Adair started cooking at the age of 13 in her mom’s restaurant.

“Every item on [the menu] are items that my mom cooked and I was raised with,” she said.

In 2004, she opened up a restaurant in the same location as Simone’s, but without the steam that Simone’s has now.

“I opened it when my son was incarcerated,” she said. “I became ill, had a kidney transplant, so it was really short-lived. It makes me know that we’re here for a reason because we’re planted in the same place that I was in ’04.”

Adair is in the right place, and it keeps her busy with the five other employees at Simone’s, all of whom are family members.

“I’m running on nitro for about 14 hours a day,” she said. “I



> David Hills, left, poses in Simone’s with his mother, Wanda Adair, and friend Deshantae Waller. | Lateshia Beachum, Staff Photo

go to sleep with the food menus on my mind, what I need to do, what I have to do. I wake up with them on my mind. It’s busy, and I’m very grateful for the business.”

Her days at Simone’s typically start around 6 a.m. She and the employees prep the food for the day, which includes chopping up and washing vegetables that she buys from her partnership with Peter A. Guinta & Son Produce.

“I’m so passionate about my cooking,” she said.

Her passion extends to the dishes that Simone’s offers, such as candied yams, banana pudding and turkey dressing. She also has incorporated the needs of her community by not cooking with much salt and not cooking with pork at all, citing high blood pressure among many of her customers. “We like to keep our food neutral.”

But she’s not neutral about her passion for food and the South Side.

“This is where we come from. This is where we started. No matter where we franchise, whatever, I think we always stay planted right here in our community.”

## SAFETY A CONCERN

**Tina Dennis has spent the past few months driving to Kirk Park each day** to pick up her grandchildren, who enjoy playing football there.

**She has concerns for their safety** even while allowing them to visit the park.

**Her fears come from recent incidents** at the park and also from a personal connection to another senseless shooting that took place in September. On Sept. 6, 2014, her 5-year-old granddaughter and the child's mother were shot while in their Midland Avenue home.

"It's getting bad out here," Dennis said. "All of this violence doesn't make sense."

**She suggests the city should have increased police presence near the park** to make the kids who play there feel safer.

**She also suggests that bushes by the football field be trimmed** to make it more difficult for shooters to hide.

"[These] kids need somewhere to go," she added, "and the park needs to get back to the way it was."

— *Rahimon Nasa*

# KIRK PARK GETS LIFT

*Grant is used to build 'outdoor classroom' for environmental education*



> The outdoor classroom was made possible with \$500,000 in funding from the New York State Department of State. It includes a raised platform over Onondaga Creek that can accommodate groups outside of formal classroom settings. The platform also provides enhanced views of Onondaga Creek. | Photo courtesy of the mayor's office.

By | Sam Blum  
*Urban Affairs reporter*

**"People young and old, and everybody in between, can enjoy it," city planner says**

**T**hanks to a half-million dollar state grant, the city has built what it calls an "outdoor classroom" — with educational signs, designs depicting local fish and a large, stone sitting bench — to teach children about the life of Onondaga Creek.

Brainstorming for the project's purpose and design began last year after the city landed the grant from a state program intended to revitalize waterfronts. Local officials convened a committee to solicit ideas. They received 32 in all, including a canoe and kayak launch, but selected the open-air classroom with its emphasis on environmental education.

The project, dedicated a month ago by Mayor Stephanie Miner, sits in Kirk Park, a wide patch of South Side greenery and playing fields. Some residents have said the park needed a boost after incidents of violence over the years, including a shooting during a Kirk Park Colts football game Sept. 7, 2014 and then a homicide Sept. 26, 2014.

During an Oct. 28 press conference to dedicate the classroom, Miner said that despite the shootings, Kirk Park is safe.

"Kirk Park is a jewel in our city, and we will not allow two knuckleheads to ruin it," Miner said. "We will continue to invest in Kirk Park and the neighborhood. The only way that you solve problems is that you run towards them and not away from them."

Officials added that residents of the surrounding neighborhood have been pleased with the project's result.

"I think people realize that [these] type of amenities are positive additions to the park," said city planner Owen Kerney. "People young and old, and everybody in between, can enjoy it."

Over the past decade, projects have been held to help clean up the creek. This outdoor classroom builds off that momentum, Kerney said. The site will also serve as a stop along the planned second phase of the Onondaga Creekwalk.

"[The outdoor classroom] is an opportunity to view the creek," Kerney said, "to learn about the creek, to sort of engage the creek inside of this great existing city park that is Kirk Park."

When building the outdoor classroom, the McGinnis





> Mayor Stephanie Miner examines the carved stone rock bench while children look on during the outdoor classroom dedication held Oct. 28, 2014. | Photo courtesy of the mayor's office.

Nelson Construction company faced several challenges. The deck itself straddles one of the main sewer runs, which forced the company to redesign the structure, said Graham Nelson, the vice president of the company.

They also had trouble finding a rock that would suffice for the large, blue stone bench on the deck.

"There were a lot of unusual parts to this project that we weren't used to seeing in our business," Nelson said, "but it turned out very nice."

Syracuse Common Councilor Bob Dougherty served on the project's planning committee. "I think there's a lot of really neat things that are happening down there, and I think this is just one more of them."

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# MUSIC FOR THE SOUL

*Band brings together local talent to 'connect with our audience'*

By | Reggie Seigler  
*A Friendly Five columnist*

Blowin' in the Wind uses its artistic talents to raise money for children, entertain listeners

Tony Baird is a military service veteran and an entrepreneur. He owns Tony Baird Electronics, Inc. The company provides audio-visual and Internet technology solutions for defense, transportation and medical companies.

He is also a musician. Tony plays bass for a local band called Blowin' in the Wind.

As the band was preparing for a Dec. 5 concert in downtown Syracuse, I asked Tony to tell me a little bit more about his band and the concert. He was a little reticent to provide me with much information. I sensed him to be a "stay in my lane" kind of guy.

He referred me to his sister, Kathy Blackwell. Kathy is the guitarist and leader of the band. Her son Eric Blackwell II is the lead singer.

Originally from Utica, Kathy grew up in Syracuse and went to high school in Central Square. There she learned to play the trumpet and baritone but has always held guitar as her first love. After high school, she moved to Rochester for college. While in college, her older brother Tony would sometimes call on her to play guitar for him at his shows.

After college, Kathy connected with Frank Spaight. Frank is the percussionist with Blowin' in the Wind. Years ago, Frank used to hang around with a band called The Meditations. Kathy would often jam with them back in those days.

I asked Kathy how she felt being a female guitarist in a male-dominated industry, and whether she felt that it made her band unique.

"I don't look at myself as a 'female guitarist,'" she said. "People come up to me and say you're not faking it; you're really playing. I appreciate the compliments, and I understand where they're coming from, but music has always been in me. There are a lot of other women who are good musicians."

Frank added: "Our uniqueness is in our ability to connect with our audience. We're a group that plays to our audience, not at our audience."

Deyquan Bowens Sr., the group's keyboardist, said he was looking forward to performing the event for that reason. He likes the idea of using his talents to help others. Concertgoers will experience great music, he said, with the money raised going to "help kids that are going



> Members pose with their instruments. | Provided photo

through some struggles with various illnesses."

The Dec. 5 concert was produced as a fundraiser for Charity for Children. The charity was co-founded in 2004 by Kathleen Miller-Murphy and Nina Albino.

According to the charity's website, it was started because of the need to help children with both chronic and terminal diseases right here in Central New York.

When speaking with Tony, I was able to get one explanation from him: "The band has the whole package," he said, describing the concert as "a nice light show and full sound system."

Blowin' in the Wind planned to perform a blend of cover and original songs written by various members of the group.

One of their signature originals is "All This Love," sung by Eric Blackwell II. Rounding out the band are Al Cutri on tenor sax and Billy Harrison on drums.

*Have A Friendly Five suggestion? Contact Reggie at [reggie@softspokenband.com](mailto:reggie@softspokenband.com) or (315) 479-9620*

## BOOK THE BAND

To book an event with Blowin' in the Wind, contact Kathy Blackwell at (315) 481-4499 or [kblackwell20@hotmail.com](mailto:kblackwell20@hotmail.com)

## SOUTH SIDE PILLAR

An ex-convict, Jimmy LaGrin, founded the Dunbar Association in 1918. He wanted to provide recreational activities for black youth in order to keep them from participating in criminal activity.

He became acquainted with black students at Syracuse University in a literary group called the Paul Laurence Dunbar Society. LaGrin named the association after the famed poet.

The Dunbar Association was incorporated in 1935. Since then, it has helped black Syracuse residents in the improvement of educational, vocational, recreational, cultural and social programming, according to the center's catalogs.

Although Dunbar has moved from two previous locations on the South Side, it now resides at 1453 S. State St., where it has been since 1964.

### HOW TO HELP

To make a donation or volunteer, contact the center at (315) 760-3155 or email [thenewdunbar@gmail.com](mailto:thenewdunbar@gmail.com)

# MOVING FORWARD

*Dunbar's interim leader works to bring new life to struggling institution*



> Dr. Chandice Haste-Jackson wants to rebuild the Dunbar Center and keep it financially viable. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

By | Mike Mahardy  
*Urban Affairs reporter*

## The Dunbar Community Center has reopened and is looking to start a new era for residents

One of the South Side's oldest institutions has opened its doors after a short downtime, bringing back a wealth of opportunities for residents of all ages.

Ever since its founding nearly a century ago, the Dunbar Association, a community center at 1453 S. State St., has provided refuge for children, the elderly and other adults — except for several months beginning last fall. Now, as the center's staff looks forward, it has plans to not only reinvigorate community programs, but also to keep the center financially stable in the long run.

Dr. Chandice Haste-Jackson is a newcomer at Dunbar. She assumed the role of interim executive director only two months ago. "Some people said we needed to go bankrupt and start over," she said. "But we've been here 96 years. We're starting fresh in a new era. We just need to re-fashion to fit the community."

Jackson spends much of her time as director writing grant applications. As of now, the center is asking for \$85,000 for youth services programming and more than \$75,000 for building repairs and refurbishments. The center's elevator broke recently, which Jackson said

didn't surprise her — the building's structure is as old as its legacy.

But Jackson is intent on moving forward. She said a lack of financial guidance from Dunbar's board contributed to the 2013 closing, and she doesn't want to repeat the same mistake.

"We need to remember the history and celebrate it, but look to the future at the same time," Jackson said. "The balance can get tenuous. We have old stuff we still need to fix, and if you don't learn from the past, you can't really learn anything new." Jackson wants to have more board members, some with financial expertise.

Dunbar's newest offering is a Zumba class. This program is instrumental in attracting new members, Jackson said, as the exercise encourages people of all ages to go to the center. But its purpose is twofold — by monitoring its patrons' physical progress, Dunbar can gather scientific data to include in its grant applications, raising the community center's credibility with donors.

Onondaga Community College is helping to revamp Dunbar's library, a small room lined with fiction, historical texts and children's picture books. Right now, sheets of white paper with handwritten labels identify the sections. With OCC's help, Jackson said Dunbar plans to implement the Dewey Decimal System.

As for the rest of the programs and services offered, the list includes: after-school day care, food pantry, arts and crafts, tutoring, mentoring, gardening, cooking and



nutrition, dance classes, and even an “Adopt-a-Family” program that supports an impoverished family with the help of a generous benefactor. Jackson said she wants the center to become the gathering place it used to be, when it brought kids in off the streets and provided a welcoming family for elderly residents.

Latischa Brooks has been working with Dunbar’s older members for months. Her life has been punctuated by frequent visits to the center. She grew up nearby and is coming up on 30 years in the human services field.

Brooks talks about the center’s older members with a smile. She remembers hearing an elderly woman’s stories while working the polls recently, and the stories she told about getting people out of their homes to vote.

“They’ve been ingrained in this community for so long, longer than any of us,” she said. “And they know when they’re making a difference. The youth can learn a lot from their elders, but it doesn’t always work like that on a day-to-day basis.”

Brooks’ father is the youngest of 16 siblings, and creating a supportive community at Dunbar is her way of repaying what he did for her as a single father. She said she hopes the center can become “the place where everyone goes to have tea at night.”

As for the younger members at Dunbar, there is no shortage of community support. The after-school pro-



> The Dunbar Center library is being revamped with the help of Onondaga Community College. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

gram offers a balance of reading, writing, math, science and art. Doreen Shaffer, director of youth development, said the staff wants to combine all these different disciplines to make the kids’ time at Dunbar beneficial.

“We have a book club, where the kids will read, and then write about the book, and what they thought of it,” Shaffer said. “Then they’ll do artwork based on what they read. It’s a well-rounded experience.”

The youth director and her assistants implemented a system called Dunbar Dollars. Children are given fake money for outstanding behavior, academic achievement, good manners or generous actions. With the currency, they can buy small items, such as toys, or even snacks.

The children are also encouraged to be resourceful. When they found a pingpong table without a net, they fashioned their own to drape across the green surface.

As the Dunbar staff ventures further into the center’s future, they need to be resourceful, too. Besides looking for donations, grants and experienced employees, they also are seeking volunteers.

Billy Denham-El is one such volunteer. He grew up on the South Side, studied at State University of New York at Oswego, earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in education, taught at Fowler Middle School and founded the 1500 gang on South Avenue.

Investigations have led Syracuse police back to the 1500 for crimes such as shootings and robberies.

“I believe in my city, and I believe in the children,” Denham-El said. “It’s important for them to look up to someone who doesn’t have a jail record. They’re surprised when they learn that I was with 1500, and I never had a record.

“I took my hustle and I took it into education.”

He said Dunbar could be instrumental in molding the kids into assets for the community. Both he and Brooks said they want to see kids leave Dunbar to pursue Ph.D.s, productive careers and endeavors that benefit those that come after them.

“We need to give these kids the tools to move properly in society,” Denham-El said, pointing toward State Street from the Dunbar conference room window. “These people care. Dunbar is an unorthodox approach for unorthodox times.”



> Billy Denham-El, a new volunteer at the center, poses in front of a depiction of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

## ZUMBA CLASSES

**What:** Zumba Fitness Classes

**When:** 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays

**Where:** Dunbar Center Gym, 1453 S. State St.

**Cost:** \$3

**To learn more:** Call Latischa Brooks at the Dunbar Center at (315) 476-4269

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