

the Stand

south side news

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Syracuse, NY

SEPTEMBER 2017 Issue 60 FREE

PICTURE PERFECT

Annual Photo Walk
captures longtime
South Side residents

Layers of Hope Exhibit

Photography group puts faces to opioid epidemic

a dad's duties

Proud father shares
advice, reflections
on meaning of family

Master motivator

Local trainer strives
to help others live well

'THEY WEAR BLUE' SERIES



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S.I. NEWHOUSE SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

SPECIAL THANKS THIS MONTH

DEAN LORRAINE BRANHAM, BEA
GONZALEZ, JASON KOHLBRENNER,
EMMA COMTOIS, MARILU LOPEZ
FRETTS, KATE COLLINS,
SOUTH SIDE INNOVATION CENTER








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EDITORIAL PURPOSE AND IN KEEPING WITH
COMMUNITY STANDARDS.

-  **ENTERTAINMENT** | Find out how gospel music instructor Dr. Joan Hillsman helps young members of the community remember their roots.
-  **HEALTH** | Read about fitness trainer Yarvon "YL" Wright, who wants South Side residents to be healthy — both physically and mentally.
-  **FATHERHOOD** | Meet Ricky Parks, a dad of five boys, who believes fathers must act as role models and provide guidance for their children.
-  **COMMUNITY** | Layers of Hope, a new photography group, is showcasing the faces behind the statistics of a national opioid crisis that's affecting local lives.
-  **PHOTO WALK** | Photographers explored the South Side on their annual walk through the neighborhood this summer, taking photos of people and places along the way.
-  **PHOTO WALK PEOPLE** | This year, during the annual Photo Walk, participants stopped to chat with people they met. Enjoy reading the interesting tidbits that were shared.
-  **THEY WEAR BLUE** | Meet the men and women behind the uniform in this in-depth series about the Syracuse Police Department and its relationship with the community.

■ Cover photography by Marilu Lopez Fretts during The Stand's annual South Side Photo Walk

CALENDAR | SEPTEMBER

What: 26th annual Westcott Street Cultural Fair
When: Noon to 6:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 17
Where: Westcott Street between Concord and Dell streets
Details: The Westcott Street Cultural Fair is an annual, one-day celebration of the diversity and uniqueness of the Westcott neighborhood through its culture, visual and performing arts, food, service organizations and family-friendly activities.
Cost: Free to attend
More info.: Visit the annual event's homepage at westcottstreetfair.org

What: Jubilee Homes of Syracuse Home Maintenance & Repair Program
When: 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 21
Where: Public Service Leadership Academy at Fowler, 227 Magnolia St.
Details: This series will consist of nine classes. Among them: Intro to Tools; Basic Plumbing; How to Install Tile and Laminate Flooring; Painting 101; Basic Electrical; Winter Weatherization Tips; and more. Attend one or all classes.
Cost: \$10 nonrefundable registration fee is required at time of sign-up to reserve spot
To register: Payment may be made in person at Jubilee Homes, 119 South Ave., from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, or online at Eventbrite.com (search Jubilee Homes Home Maintenance & Repair Program)
More info.: Call (315) 428-0070 or email info@jubilee-homes.org

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED
What: Volunteer for Home HeadQuarters 11th annual Block Blitz
When: 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 14
Where: 100-200 blocks of West Borden Ave. (will include 200 block of West Beard and some of Landon Avenue)
Volunteer needs: Paint • Plants • Carpenters • Food for volunteers • Homeowner gifts • Electrician • Tree services • Concrete/Masonry • Storage pods • Paving specialists • Helping hands
To volunteer: Email info@homehq.org or visit homehq.org/block-blitz

This summer, The Stand welcomed two interns who contributed several stories, videos and photos. **Sarah Perkes**, a broadcast and digital journalism major at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, joined our staff in June, jumping right in to cover local events. Not only did she write, but she also produced video stories. In covering the Greater Syracuse Land Bank's Paint the City event, Perkes was joined by **Zau Nhkum**, a recent graduate of the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central's media program. Nhkum interned with The Stand during his final weeks of high school and volunteered to shoot photos at some local events.



The interns' work captured the goal of **Paint the City** — to add life to drab, boarded-up homes throughout Syracuse. During the nonprofit's first event, held June 3, murals were painted on 62 boards, which were then placed on blighted properties. By July, several participants of our annual Photo Walk were able to find and photograph some of these murals affixed to vacant properties along West Newell Street.



In print this year, we're aiming to share a 'Where Are They Now' article in each issue to catch up with a past featured South Sider. In this issue, Syracuse Police Officer Ahmad Mims is profiled on Page 14. He graced the cover in 2015. The profile is a featured part of an in-depth journalism project — **They Wear Blue** — produced by Newhouse School journalists. Justin Mattingly interviewed Mims over a four-month period. This project allows readers to see what it's like to work as a police officer, and it examines the current relationship between police and the local community.

If there's an individual from a past issue you think we should follow up with, let me know by emailing ashley@mysouthsidestand.com or calling me at (315) 882-1054.

Ashley Kang

NOMINATE A FATHER

We are eager to meet more fathers for our ongoing Fatherhood Q/A series each month.

To submit a nomination for an outstanding father to be featured in a future issue, send us a short explanation with contact information. Call The Stand Director Ashley Kang at (315) 882-1054 or email her at ashley@mysouthsidestand.com

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

We invite your letters. Send them to Ashley Kang, South Side Communication Center, 2331 S. Salina St., Syracuse, NY 13205 or to ashley@mysouthsidestand.com. Maximum length: 200 words. Include your full name, address and contact information.

Paint the City



| Zau Nhkum

| Dale Harp

IMMERSE YOURSELF

See **Dr. Joan Hillsman** in action online in a video produced as part of the 2017 Multimedia Immersion Workshop held in May at Syracuse University

To view, visit vimeo.com/218392949

To find her online, visit joanhillsmanmusicnetwork.com

To contact her, email jhillsman@twcny.rr.com

ROOTED IN GOSPEL

Dr. Joan Hillsman tirelessly works to raise gospel music to a new level



> Dr. Joan Hillsman has worked on many projects since moving to Syracuse in 2009. She served on Mayor Stephanie Miner's Arts Transitional Team, worked with Say Yes to Education and organized a Syracuse Chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America, producing an original gospel CD in collaboration with Bethany Baptist Church. | Sergey Korovayny, Staff Photo

By | Nate Band
Staff reporter

Hillsman wants to teach the new generation how gospel's roots can inform its practice today

Dr. Joan Hillsman, who believes in the creative powers of music and the arts, has been embracing gospel music as a way to better her community.

Since her arrival in the Syracuse area a few years ago, Hillsman has been involved in several community projects, such as "Say Yes to Education," and also has organized a Syracuse chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America.

"A lot of my work is volunteer," Hillsman said. "I go to nursing homes to make sure that they're able to experience music."

Hillsman, 74, grew up in a sheltered environment in South Carolina, never meeting her father, who was killed fighting in World War II.

Education has always been at the forefront of Hillsman's life, first as she grew up in South Carolina, then as she earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from

Howard University in Washington, D.C., and ultimately as she earned a doctorate in musicology from Union Institute & University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"Early on, I had strong values, strong values about education," Hillsman said. "Positive values about being the best that I can be so that I can make good choices. But the main thing that my mother taught me was that you need to share what you get. Carry people as you go up and reach back and tell them how."

Today, Hillsman continues with the same values and motivations that propelled her to offer her help through music. The classes and workshops that she offers are all part of Hillsman's desire to view gospel music as more of an art form than a religious practice.

"I'm trying to take gospel to another level," she said. "We love the history in it, but now colleges and schools and universities are embracing the culture. I find it very exciting because almost every week there's some kind of festival, and you can plug into what you like and learn cultures through music or through the arts."

Hillsman understands the financial struggles of families, and she says her singing and workshops have



> A local music educator, Dr. Joan Hillsman provides private lessons at her studio, located at 4455 E. Genesee St. She says her mother taught her to “share what you get.” | Sergey Korovayny, Staff Photo

never been for financial gain.

“Nobody could ever ... (be denied) my service because they could not afford me,” Hillsman said. “Because in the end, if you’re really serious about it, I’ll do it for you for free. Sometimes people will come and ask me, ‘Well, what do you charge?’ and I say I’ll do it for free. Let’s talk about the fee later.”

In true “old-school” format, information on Hillsman’s work and workshops can be discovered through word of mouth or books she has written over the years. “You don’t get many people going online to see what I do,” she said.

Overall, the music teacher, who teaches out of her studio located at 4455 E. Genesee St., just wants to be there for members of her community, whether that means helping out through music or sharing life experiences with young people. From a young age, Hillsman was taught to display and represent herself in a way that others would aspire to do the same.

“It’s a responsibility to be a role model because everything is not going to be smooth,” she said. “Leave all your baggage back and go out and present yourself and what you do to people. Then the opportunity will come where you can see pitfalls you want to avoid.”

Hillsman’s support includes academic and music instruction, as well as community outreach to schools, which are all elements that have become valuable to the local community.

“We have to keep a vision of positiveness, a vision of sharing,” Hillsman said. “We need people to know that there is another way.”

— Stacy Fernandez contributed to this story



> Featured in Dr. Joan Hillsman’s studio are many mementos of her career in gospel music. | Sergey Korovayny, Staff Photo

HILLSMAN AS AUTHOR



Dr. Joan Hillsman’s most recognized book is titled, **“Gospel Music: An African American Art Form.”**

The book’s mission is to provide a framework for the study of gospel music through detailed sections with lesson plans, appendices and resources.

Among the sections: African Roots and Characteristics, Negro Spirituals, Black Congregational Singing, Gospel History, Cross Over Artists, Youth in Gospel and Gospel Music in the Academic Curriculum.

HEALTHY MONDAY

Locally, the **Onondaga Creek Monday Mile** is open daily for South Side residents

- 1. Begin at intersection of Onondaga Creek Parkway and West Brighton Avenue.
- 2. Head toward Kirk Park; turn around at intersection of Onondaga Creek Parkway and Hunt Avenue.
- 3. Once you turn around, continue along Onondaga Creek Parkway until you reach the other side of Hunt Avenue.
- 4. Turn around and head back toward the Start/Finish sign.

BRING MONDAY MILE TO YOUR COMMUNITY

Healthy Monday Syracuse is interested in providing support to communities that want to promote physical activity and seek to reduce the associated risk of chronic disease by installing a Monday Mile walking route. The routes encourage people to walk a mile for their health by following a signed route.

To learn more about funding opportunities, contact Leah Moser at lemoser@maxwell.syr.edu

MOTIVATION MANTRA

Local fitness trainer encourages working out for emotional well-being



> From left, Leslie Davis-Chandler, Fre'keisha Corriders, YL Wright and Adavia Fudge put their hands together as a way to acknowledge their hard work and determination this summer. They had just finished a vigorous workout up and down several steps on Euclid Avenue. | Emily Elconin, Staff Photo

By | Jordyn Weisberg
Staff reporter

YL Wright finds fitness is a way to maintain not only physical health, but mental health, too

A chance encounter three years ago between two men, who both emigrated from predominantly English-speaking nations in West Africa, changed the life of one and reinforced the life mission of the other.

In 2014, Ronju Benefu immigrated to America from his home in Ghana. He had no money, no place to live, and was constantly moving around with other people from his country. Forty-seven-year-old Yarvon Wright, an immigrant from Liberia who goes by YL, was the first person whom Benefu met in Syracuse. One day, Wright overheard Benefu talking to a friend at the Burger King on South Salina Street.

“He didn’t even know me,” Benefu said during a phone interview. “He heard me talking to somebody and asked the person what is going on with me. He then called and contacted me and left a note with five hundred dollars in it, and I got a room. He came and brought me food, and he checked on me.”

With Wright’s support, Benefu eventually went back

to school and earned his degree. He now works with youth development in Atlanta, Georgia, and occasionally visits Syracuse.

This random act of selflessness is Wright’s mantra for living. He said that he grew up in a family that taught him to “treat others from your heart, not from expectation.” When Wright saw Benefu that day, he said he knew he had to help.

Wright, too, has found a way to help himself through hard times. Three years ago, a “terrible divorce” left him depressed and anxious. He had hit rock bottom and turned to fitness as an emotional outlet. He met Kenny Robinson, a fellow gym-goer, who inspired and helped Wright create a new lifestyle. In June 2015, Wright decided to make a career out of helping others: He founded YL Wright Total Fitness. The business is not based in a building, but Wright finds clients through word of mouth and by meeting people.

“Total fitness. Mind, body and soul. This is a new total journey. It’s not about your wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend,” Wright said, “because on the outside you could look great, but inside you could be terrible. That’s why it’s called mind, body and fitness to get you where you need to be you.”

Wright's emphasis on "mind, body and soul" as the complete package of a fitness regimen has not gone unnoticed outside of the gym.

"You should see the people that relate to him," Benefu said. "He never embarrasses them or judges them. People like that are hard to come by."

Jessy Martinez, a client of Wright's since March, met Wright when he offered to help with her posture. She has become his self-proclaimed "poster child." Martinez said that, with Wright's help, she lost weight — 36 pounds in all.

"My confidence has gone from being on the floor to sky high," Martinez said. "Before, I didn't want anybody looking at me, and I didn't want to be friends with anybody. My personality has come out more."

Wright, who says he is a certified trainer, has a consultation with each of his clients. He asks them about their goals and target areas to train accordingly. He does meal plans and meal prepping, and he shares lists with his clients of foods to eat and not to eat. Wright charges \$10 per session or a \$100 flat fee for 10 weeks.

For him, none of his business is "about the money." Wright's main income comes from working as a help desk analyst at DUMAC Business Systems, Inc. He said he would be homeless if personal training was his only job. For him, it's just another opportunity to help people, even without compensation.

"He helps me, I help him," Martinez said. "So as people see me, he gets those clients, and then he's helping me by (my) getting a healthier lifestyle."

Wright mostly trains at Planet Fitness, where he has a membership, and a lot of his clients have memberships there as well. Some gyms have policies that don't allow personal training by anyone who is not a certified trainer employed by those gyms. Planet Fitness, for example, does not allow personal training by members or guests of members for insurance reasons. Personal training is allowed there only if a member hires a certified trainer who works for Planet Fitness.

Even assisting a friend or offering some advice has gotten him in trouble in the past, Wright said.

He relates an experience at one gym. "(My client and I) were walking around the track and she's asking me how many squats to do and then they put a block on (my) membership," Wright said.

No challenge will stop Wright from helping any of his clients because he hopes that one day he can achieve his lifetime goal: appearing on The Ellen DeGeneres Show.

"I like Ellen because she helps a lot of people," Wright said.

"Ellen is like an Oprah. All I want is my own building and my own facility and my own space to do what I want."

EATING BETTER

Learn how to stretch your food dollars

When: 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Thursday, Sept. 7

Where: Central Library's first-floor Community Room, 447 S. Salina St.

Details: Nutrition educator Holly Adams from the Food Bank of Central New York will present a program on healthy eating on a budget, easy ways to eat more produce and how to plan healthy meals

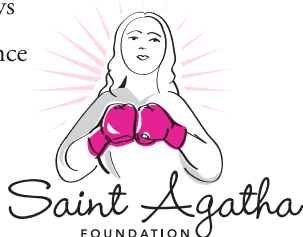
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Ricky Parks

Nominated by Travis Robinson

By | Ashley Kang
The Stand director

Q: What did it feel like when you became a father?

A: I was nervous at first, because I didn't grow up with my father. So I didn't really think I knew how to be a father. After the first year, I got used to it and enjoyed having him around. Then they just all started coming.

Q: What can you share about your children?

A: I have five boys — all with different personalities. I can say it is definitely busy in my household. Ricky, 10, who is not my wife's biological son, lives in Maryland but comes up for the summer, some holidays and birthdays, and we visit him some, too. He's very laid-back like myself and is my firstborn. He's not as much into the sports I'm into, but very interested in wrestling. Amir, 8, is a busybody — he has to move all the time; he cannot sit still for even two seconds. Zion, 7, is very adventurous, asks question after question and wants to learn. He wants to know everything. Micah, 4, loves sports and is always on YouTube watching plays. He thinks he's Ezekiel Elliott from the Dallas Cowboys. He's a sports guy. Gavin, 3, is the most talkative one at that age. He learned faster than the rest of them because he was watching his brothers. He was potty-trained a couple months after turning 2 and speaking in full sentences by 3.

Q: Did you always want a big family?

A: Growing up, no. I didn't even want to get married when I was in high school, but I guess God works in mysterious ways.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

A: *It's weird actually. We went to the prom together in high school. She went to Nottingham High School, and I went to Corcoran. We met at one of the basketball games. Then we went off to college and weren't together. We were away from each other for about five years, and out of the blue, I just called her. We've been together ever since. We both went away to college and then returned to Syracuse. She went to Canisius, and I attended SUNY Canton.*

Q: What was your relationship like with your father?

A: I really didn't have much of a relationship with my father. When we would see each other, we were cordial, but I can't say he was present. As far as father-figures, I took heed to my uncles and older cousins, who would give me good advice when I needed it. I was mostly a self-learner and picked up on what was right and what was wrong. I was raised by my mother and grandmother, but they couldn't do everything like a father could have provided.

Q: What is unique about the father's role?

A: It's very important to be in your kids' life because it's very easy for them to get distracted and do the wrong thing. So guidance is a major thing — especially with boys. Guidance is the key for boys. If they don't get that love from a father or mentor, they are going to seek that love from somewhere else and it could be a negative force.



MEET FATHER RICKY: Parks, 34, has five boys. Clockwise, they are: Ricky Jr., 10 (standing); Micah, 4; Gavin, 3; Zion, 7; and Amir, 8. This month, Parks and his wife, Rhea, celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary. | Zachary Krahmer, Staff photo

Q: As a father, is there anything you do that would surprise people?

A: I wouldn't say people would be surprised because people know I'm with my boys a lot. But they may not know that every weekend I bring them up to the football field and practice with them, take them to every karate practice. It just may not be known that nearly all my free time is spent with them.

Q: What's your opinion about commonly held stereotypes about black fathers?

A: Statistics wise, I think the stereotype rings true, especially in the lower-income areas. That probably is true. But I can't speak for everyone. I know that I am a good father, because I didn't grow up with a model but still do the best I can for my sons.

Q: Any advice for first-time dads?

A: Just be there. Being there physically is most important. You can't buy their love and want your kids to respect you later in life. Some of the fathers I do know, think probably because they didn't grow up with a father, either, say 'I bought them this and bought them that' and think they are doing great, but don't put in any time.

“Guidance is the key for boys”

RAISING AWARENESS

Photography group combats stigma of drug addiction through images



> The daughter of Cherise Lavender Brown, who died of a drug overdose, kisses her mother's headstone during the family's visit to Brown's gravesite. | Photo provided by Layers of Hope, taken by DJ Igelsrud

By | JP Hadley
Staff reporter

Photos of those touched by addiction on display to shine a light on growing opioid problem

As the opioid crisis continues to grip the United States, photographers in Syracuse are picking up their cameras to help those in need.

Layers of Hope, an organization founded this year, aims to raise awareness for addicted individuals. Photographers look to remove the stigma of addiction by attaching human faces to the problem.

The group staged a photo exhibit earlier this year at the Maxwell Memorial Library in Camillus and in the windows of the former DeWitt Library in the Shopping-Town Mall. The Maxwell exhibit was in partnership with Prevention Network, an anti-addiction organization.

Layers of Hope began doing photo shoots and staging their photo exhibits in the first half of 2016. The group formed with members of the Syracuse Camera Club after coming into contact with other photographers who were raising awareness about drug abuse in Auburn.

Layers of Hope functions by contacting various addiction agencies in Central New York and gauging

their interest in being profiled. Bob Gates, who serves as president of the Syracuse Camera Club and is a member of Layers of Hope, explained that the group is currently reaching out to agencies for the next photo opportunity.

"The way this works is we are at the beck and call of people who might find some use for what we do," Gates said. "We don't have any agenda here."

Susan Scholl, the internship coordinator for Syracuse University's David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, also has worked as the chemical dependency treatment coordinator at Crouse Hospital. She describes addiction as a "spiritual emergency" because, among other factors, a sense of disconnection from a community can lead to an addiction.

"People have to recognize that our culture is tremendously stressful, and we are disconnected," Scholl said. "As a species, we're hardwired to alter our mood ... I might hike or do art, or whatever. So, this is the human condition."

Members of the group relish the opportunity to show an alternative side of drug addiction.

"It's been so rewarding to take pictures of the folks in recovery themselves," said DJ Igelsrud, chairman of Layers of Hope. "They're a strong, wonderful bunch of people that have gotten on the other side of addiction."

BY THE NUMBERS

The number of deaths caused by unintended prescription opioid-related deaths in Onondaga County:

- 52 in 2015
- 99 in 2016
- 18 in the first three months of 2017

— Source: Onondaga County Medical Examiner's Office

AN EXPERT'S TAKE

"Attention has been drawn to addiction as an issue of human suffering more than just a judicial 'war on drugs' perspective of bad people doing bad things so let's lock them up," said

Dessa Bergen-Cico, an associate professor in the public health program at Syracuse University's David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics.

"Hopefully we've crossed that threshold with the prevalence of this problem, and we'll be able to address it in a way that's more sustaining in terms of social recovery or resiliency against another epidemic."

Bergen-Cico added that drug addicts tend to feel marginalized and may see themselves solely as drug users, and nothing more. Connections with non-drug users would create a beneficial social bridge to allow them to view themselves as something more.



| STEVEN FRIEDMAN



| RONDELL PARKER



| TAMMY REESE

The Stand’s eighth annual Photo Walk welcomed more than 20 participants July 22 for a photography adventure. They explored the South Side neighborhood, captured photos and practiced their photography skills.

Local photographer Marilu Lopez Fretts reviewed several tips and suggestions on composition. Kate Collins, a photojournalist and video producer, provided a short lesson on best practices for taking photos with a smartphone.

New this year, participants were encouraged to take on a surprise challenge by drawing a suggested theme out of a hat. Many obliged and set off to capture their assignment — workers, hidden treasures, curves, families, emotions and other themes.

Participants left the South Side Innovation Center to start the walk, some going up South Salina Street and others heading off toward downtown. This year, some groups popped into Blue Brothers Barber Shop and others into Cut Kings Barber Shop. Participants met families, workers and

residents volunteering in the community.

Images captured residents on a typical summer day, as well as some new additions to the neighborhood. Two board members of The Stand wandered down West Newell Street, where many vacant houses are boarded up. The two captured photos of new murals that were painted on the boards — a project of the Greater Syracuse Land Bank.

The Stand’s summer intern, Sarah Perkes, joined the walk to interview several people whom photographers met along the way.

Those who took photos during the walk are: Zachary Krahmer, Dawn Burness, Todd Michalek, Paul Schlesinger, Christopher Montgomery, Dale Harp, Robert Schulz, Deborah Putman, Charles Pierce-El, Miguel Balbuena, Rosalie Spitzer, Ken Frehm, Janice Carroll, Tammy Reese, Erika Sternard, Steve Friedman, Lenny Martinez, Rondell Parker and Daniel Michaels.



| JANICE CARROLL



| DAWN BURNES



| DEBORAH PUTMAN



| ROBERT SCHULZ



| ERIKA STERNARD



| DANIEL MICHAELS



| LENNY MARTINEZ



| MARILU LOPEZ FRETTS



| ZACHARY KRAHMER



| CHARLES PIERCE-EL



| KATE COLLINS

MEET RESIDENTS WE MET

KENNETH SIMMONS

Evangelical Kenneth, who runs Feeding the Sheep Ministry, spends summer afternoons giving out food to youth in the neighborhood at the corner of West Colvin and South Salina streets.

— Zachary Krahmer



| ZACHARY KRAHMER



| ZACHARY KRAHMER

IAN MUHAMMED

As Ian handed out copies of “The Final Call” on South Salina Street, he said his mission is to spread the work of the Islamic paper founded by Minister Louis Farrakhan. He does it, he said, because he wants to make a change in the community and have a positive influence.
— Sarah Perkes



| ROSALIE SPITZER

ARLENE BRODBECK

Arlene has lived in Syracuse on and off for the past 41 years. She is a self-described “country girl” from Verona, New York, originally. In sharing her greatest accomplishment, she said: “Winning at the Vernon Downs Race-track. I was saying a certain horse was going to win when my father said it wasn’t.” — Sarah Perkes



| KEN FREHM



| RONDELL PARKER

ARCENIA ‘DEBBY’ BEMBRY

Instantly when we met “Debby,” she showed her bold, beautiful personality. “I know I’m sexy,” she said as she posed as a “model” for five minutes. She has lived in Syracuse her whole life, and she currently works two jobs and is best friends with her “sister,” Phyletta. — Sarah Perkes



| DEBORAH PUTMAN

THE REV. JEFFEL MIKE

Rev. Mike’s funny personality shined through as soon as we hit the steps to his house. He has been a reverend for about 40 years. “I’m a preacher man. I love the church. I love spiritual music and good preaching.” I told him I hadn’t been to church in months and promised to go. He stressed how important it was to keep a promise. “It’s a very bad thing to break a promise to someone.” The next day, I walked down the aisle of Tucker Missionary Baptist Church and sat next to him in the front row. — Sarah Perkes



| KEN FREHM

ABOUT THE SERIES

Many people think of the police force as one unit, like a tribe with a single identity. But beyond the blue of the uniform, each police officer is unique. This project takes you inside the lives of the chief and several officers in Syracuse, showing that the force is truly a collection of individuals. Given the country's major news events involving the police over the past few years, and because this is a city where the minority population has very nearly become the majority, we pay special attention to minority officers in this project. They account for just one in every 10 officers, though Syracuse is 45 percent minority. Our project is not intended to be either "positive" or "negative," but rather an honest and powerful look at this complex issue — all with the hope that it improves police and community relations.

Yet while race matters, it is not everything. As the new chief in Ferguson, Missouri, told a reporter on our team, when citizens see police, they don't see individuals or race, "They see you as blue."

READ MORE

Next month, *The Stand* will feature more stories and photos from *They Wear Blue*.

A SYRACUSE NATIVE

SPD Officer Ahmad Mims isn't giving up on the city he loves



> Officers Ahmad Mims, right, and William Lashomb, members of Syracuse Police Department Crime Reduction Team, talk over the next steps after processing contraband found during a traffic stop. The Crime Reduction Team targets areas of high crime and heavy gang activity throughout the city of Syracuse. | Michael Santiago, *They Wear Blue* Photographer

By | Justin Mattingly
They Wear Blue reporter

[The sixth-year cop has always worn a uniform, from the basketball court to city streets](#)

Ahmad Mims stood on the opposite side of the basketball court as a Potsdam point guard raced toward the rim for a breakaway layup. All signs pointed to two points for the Bears.

But Mims didn't give up — he never does — as he raced from one side of the court to the other and blocked the shot off the front of the rim.

"You never give up on a play," Mims, 33, says now of the play a dozen years ago, in January 2005. "You never give up on anything."

The basketball standout at Oswego State wears a different uniform now — blue instead of green. He believes in Syracuse and its people — and he is focused on stopping the violence that plagues them through his work on the special Crime Reduction Team of the Syracuse Police Department.

"We patrol these streets and we want to keep these communities safe. We don't want the crime up. We don't want to chase after people every day," Mims said. "We

want to help. If everyone came together, I think this city could be flawless almost. As a whole it would work if we just came together."

He's spent the past six years as a police officer, including the past five months on the elite Crime Reduction Team. On some nights it's mundane patrol with lots of conversation and few stops. On others, he's presented with the unexpected: a shooting or a heavy drug bust.

On a night this past April, he fired his gun for the first time in the line of duty.

On April 22, Mims and another Syracuse police officer stopped a Chevrolet Uplander van on Rowland Street near the intersection of South Geddes Street. The stop turned into a drug investigation, and the driver sped away from the two officers. After the van stopped again, the driver spun it in reverse with Mims and the other officer, Nicholas Voggel, nearby. The van hit the two officers.

Mims shot at the van, which had the driver and three children inside, as it sped away, hitting it at least one time. The van was ultimately stopped and the driver, identified by police as Peter Dixon, 34, of Syracuse, was arrested and charged with two counts of reckless endangerment, three counts of endangering the welfare of a child, and unlawful possession of marijuana.

The two officers were treated for minor injuries. Mims was put on paid leave, standard police protocol, and cleared to return to work in June.

Only about 27 percent of police officers say they have ever fired their gun in the line of duty, according to a Pew Research Center survey of almost 8,000 cops in 54 departments with 100 or more officers. Yet the public grossly over-estimates how often it happens. Asked to make a guess, 83 percent of people surveyed by Pew said the average officer had pulled the trigger on the job at some time. (There were four officer-involved shootings in 2016 in Syracuse, and citizens died in three of them.)

In an interview a few weeks before the shooting, Mims explained why police don't want to fire their guns.

"We want to stop the crime. (But) we don't want to do that (pull our gun). There's a lot of times we could draw our guns and we don't. People see police draw their guns and think we're the bad guys," he said. "That's the misconception we always get. Just listen to what we have to say. We'll listen to you. Let's work this out."

On a rainy Friday night in March, Mims and his partner, William Lashomb, patrolled the South Side of Syracuse, working an area with a high crime rate. They pulled over a midsize SUV outside a church, suspecting its windows were over-tinted. The two veteran officers discovered some marijuana as well as an open container.

The two men in the car, both black men — as is Mims — didn't cooperate at first, trying to hide the marijuana and protesting that they were clean. Mims explained he and Lashomb would be searching the vehicle anyway, and — eventually — the men in the car relented.

It didn't happen on this night, but as a black police officer on the street, Mims has heard it: He's a "sellout," an "Uncle Tom," one of "us" who doesn't "care about us."

"It doesn't matter white cop or black cop. We're equal — we're all equal," Mims said. "We're here to do a

job and keep people safe."

There are pros and cons to being a black police officer. Only 7.1 percent of SPD officers (32) are black in a force of 445, and in a city where minorities make up 44 percent of the population. (In the Syracuse force, 2.5 percent of officers are Hispanic, 0.5 percent Native American and 0.4 percent "other.")

"It makes me more approachable because they see someone who looks like them," Mims said. "Even though (a white officer and black officer would) probably say the same thing, they see someone who looks like them and a lot of times that eases people. I'm still going to tell you what's right and wrong — I'm not going to sugarcoat it."

A fast-climber in the Syracuse police ranks, Mims was promoted in January of this year to the Crime Reduction Team, a 12-man unit that works four 10-hour shifts per week in target areas with high crime rates and a heavy gang presence.

The CRT is on the front lines of Syracuse's battle against violent crime. Its goal is to be "proactive" in police jargon, often parlaying routine traffic stops into significant arrests that can be high-danger, high-tension encounters. The team seized 108 guns, made 378 felony arrests and confiscated \$95,000 in cash in 2016.

CRT members also respond to shootings, and on that same Friday night that Mims and Lashomb stopped the car with tinted windows, they rushed to the scene of one. They jumped from their car and joined other officers — the suspect still on the run.

The group of officers — the majority of them CRT members — combed nearby yards and quizzed local residents. Eventually they spotted footprints in the snow, leading them to a home where the suspect was hiding — and peacefully arrested. After finding a gun in a backyard, the officers headed back to the office for the last step: numbing paperwork.



> Throughout high school, Ahmad Mims was very active in sports — basketball being his favorite. He played college ball at Oswego State, where he would go on to be an all-league player and the school's all-time leading shot blocker. He was known on the court for his defense, a trait that he brings to his job on the Crime Reduction Team. Mims continues to play basketball and uses it as a way to reach as many youth in Syracuse as possible, playing a mentor-like role in their lives. | Michael Santiago, They Wear Blue Photographer

FEATURED OFFICERS

They Wear Blue spotlights five other SPD staff members:

- **Chief of Police Frank Fowler** — *named chief in 2009, Fowler will step down in summer 2018*
- **Detective Mark Rusin** — *with the Criminal Investigations Division, Rusin was an interrogator in the Baby Maddox case*
- **Officer Emily Quinones** — *patrolling mainly Syracuse's West Side neighborhood, Quinones grew up in Puerto Rico speaking only Spanish*
- **Officer Lashonda Russell** — *originally from Long Island, Russell was sworn in as a Syracuse officer in March 2016*
- **Officer Dennis Burlingame** — *as 'Officer Friendly,' Burlingame attends a range of events to bridge the gap between the community and the police department*

Student journalists with They Wear Blue also interviewed: a **new recruit** who graduated in May from the Syracuse Police Academy; students in the law enforcement track at the **Public Service Leadership Academy** at Fowler; **community activists** striving to limit neighborhood violence; and many more.

BASKETBALL STATS

'02-'03 FRESHMAN

- 19 minutes per game
- 50% field goal percentage
- 5.2 rebounds per game
- 6.3 points per game
- 0.4 assists per game
- Team record: 16-11

'03-'04 SOPHOMORE

- 29 minutes per game
- 43% field goal percentage
- 34 3-pointers
- 5.4 rebounds per game
- 11.7 points per game
- 46 blocks
- Team record: 18-9

'04-'05 JUNIOR

- 30.7 minutes per game
- 45% field goal percentage
- 35 3-pointers
- 6.3 rebounds per game
- 11.6 points per game
- 55 blocks
- Team record: 24-6 (16-0 at home)

'05-'06 SENIOR

- 32.2 minutes per game
- 54.7% field goal percentage
- 8.2 rebounds per game
- 15 points per game
- 73 blocks
- Team record: 22-8

Mims works long hours, often taking on overtime at Syracuse Hancock International Airport. He enjoys going home to his North Syracuse residence, where he streams movies and TV shows, including “The Wire,” an HBO TV show that focuses on narcotics in Baltimore, much of the same work Mims and his team does.

The self-described “city rat” grew up playing pretty much any sport he could. In baseball, he patrolled centerfield and pitched; in football, he played tailback. He switched over to cross country in middle school before the Cicero–North Syracuse High School volleyball coach recruited him to play.

He went to the state championships in track and field, finishing second in the high jump to what Mims called a natural, a competitor who “just got up there and did it. No practice.”

His favorite sport, though, was basketball.

Mims could always be found on the court — in city parks growing up, in the gym during the season and after, when he played AAU with some of the best players in the area, including former Syracuse forward Matt Gorman. He’d make room for family trips to Disney World and a trip every summer vacation with his three siblings, and for his job at the local McDonald’s.

“Slinks,” a nickname for Mims’ tall and long frame, was recruited by the likes of Le Moyne and Roberts Wesleyan to play basketball. After a recruiting trip to Oswego with a former Solvay basketball player, Mims knew that’s where he should be.

“Ahmad was a great kid, a great player in high school. He was highly recruited and we knew he’d be a great Division III player,” said Kevin Broderick, the Oswego basketball coach when Mims played. “He’s the type of guy who every coach wants in their program.”

The 13-year Oswego head coach saw Mims play his junior year at CNS and knew he wanted him on the Lakers. Broderick worked as hard to get the 6-foot-4-inch Mims to Oswego as he had any recruit, he said, because of his character and “off the charts athleticism.”

Mims shined in the gold and green, becoming an all-league player, a 1,000-point scorer and the school’s all-time leading shot-blocker.

“In the 20 years I’ve coached, Ahmad is one of the top guys who could pick up things unbelievably quick,” said Broderick, who now coaches at Niagara University. “One of my favorite players I’ve ever coached.”

After graduating from Oswego in 2006 with an elementary education and wellness management degree, Mims was on the teacher-coach track. He helped out Broderick for a year as a volunteer assistant coach — “I loved basketball and I didn’t want to leave it” — and served as an assistant junior varsity and varsity coach at his high school alma mater.

Mims student-taught, but the experience wasn’t what he envisioned. He thought about a different career. His father, Kevin, had always dreamed of becoming a

“It doesn’t matter white cop or black cop. We’re equal — we’re all equal. We’re here to do a job and keep people safe.”

— Officer Ahmad Mims

police officer, talking about it to his four children and sometimes pretending to drive his personal car around like a police car. Kevin tried a handful of times to join both the Syracuse Police Department and New York state police, but didn’t pass the test.

A simple question from his father sparked Mims’ interest in wearing the blue uniform: “Why don’t you take the test?”

He decided to do it after talking to some friends, in what he now considers the best decision of his life after never thinking he’d be a cop.

His family supports him in a different way now, behind the scenes rather than in the stands at sporting events. His father said he consistently worries about the danger of being a police officer, but supports his son’s decision.

“You’re just on edge all the time,” Kevin Mims said.

Underneath Mims’ police uniform — a hooded sweatshirt with a bulletproof vest overtop and military green pants — are an estimated 30 tattoos. His got his first tattoo, a tribute to his “Slinks” nickname, when he was 18. He’s consistently added to them. Each one has a special meaning, including the portrait of his 5-year-old son on his back.

His son lives in Virginia with his mother, whom Mims said he’s better friends with now than when the two were married. He sees his son once a month and for an extended period in the summer. The 5-year-old loves Legos, Mims said, and is speaking some Spanish.

“We’ll see if he’s going to be a ballplayer,” Mims joked.

As for Mims, he still is a ballplayer. He works out every other day and still plays regularly in a Sunday league. He showcased his talents in March at the Syracuse Police Department vs. Syracuse Fire Department charity basketball game.



> It hits home for Ahmad Mims when there's a police shooting involving kids. "I feel for the parents It makes me just want to come home and hug Ayden and not let him go or just talk to him on the phone. No one wants to see a life lost by a police officer — that's not how they operate. A life lost is a terrible thing." Spending time with his son is a way for Mims to release stress and decompress from the things he sees on the job. | Michael Santiago, They Wear Blue Photographer

With a defender overplaying him on the left side of the court in the third quarter of the game, Mims cut behind him and took a bounce pass. The former all-league college basketball player and state finalist high jumper sprung to deliver a two-handed jam over two defenders. The ball through the rim, Mims emphatically slapped the backboard with both hands. He finished the game with 15 points, 11 rebounds and four blocks in a 74-68 Syracuse police win.

Mims' parents, who are from North Syracuse, were in the stands for the game. They never miss one. They couldn't contain their smiles after the game while talking with their son, giving the familiar look of proud parents.

This spring, Mims tried out for the Syracuse police SWAT team, an elite unit that would add responsibility for the fast-climbing and challenge-seeking officer.

"The sky's the limit for a guy like (Ahmad). He's smart. He knows how to do the job. He's young and so the sky's the limit," said Syracuse Chief of Police Frank Fowler. "Could easily see him being in my position one of these days."

When Mims graduated from Oswego, he returned to the school and to his high school as a coach to share his knowledge. Now, as a police officer, he's working to do the same thing.

He grew up in the city as a black child and wondered out loud over a meal in a Syracuse restaurant recently how great it would be if a child saw Mims, a

black police officer, on the job and then wanted to go on to be one, too.

"I know what it's like growing up out here. I chose a path and it is what it is," he said. "As a whole we want everyone to be safe. That's the ultimate goal. We want to preserve life, keep the kids and the streets safe."

Mims struggles with the state of police-community relations, both in the U.S. and here in Syracuse. There's not enough respect, he said.

"If you just listen, nobody would ever fight with anybody," Mims said. "Rather than separate from the police and the community, it's got to be more of a togetherness."

Mims wants to see more people attend the Civilian Police Academy to get a better understanding of police work. Forty attended the second one Syracuse has had, held in January.

For Mims, that understanding has come from a life in and around Syracuse. He spent his childhood in the city and got along with police officers he saw on the beat. He's carried the never-give-up attitude his parents instilled in him through his childhood and into college on the basketball court. Now, he's not giving up on his city.

"It doesn't matter black or white, grew up in the city or not, it comes down to respect. Everyone's got to respect each other," Mims said. "Doesn't matter what you look like, who you are, or whether you have a badge or not. One of these days this city will be good again."

COLLEGE HIGHS

During his college basketball career, Ahmad Mims reached the following achievements:

- First Team All SUNYAC
- Member of the 1,000 point club on Jan. 10, 2006
- All-time leading shot blocker in SUNY Oswego basketball history

DIVERSITY OF SPD

A mission of the Syracuse Police Department under Chief of Police Frank Fowler has been to “increase minority hiring and retention in order to more accurately reflect the diversity of the city and to recruit candidates that represented a variety of ethnic, cultural and racial populations.”

In 2010:

- 94% of all active SPD officers were white
- 6.3% black
- 1.7% Hispanic

From 2011-2013, the SPD annual reports continued to list minority hiring and retention as a priority.

In 2013, the sworn police officer force had shown progress in officer diversity with:

- 90.6% white
- 7% black
- 1.5% Hispanic
- And a miniscule percentage of Native Americans

In 2016:

- 89.5% white
- 7.1% black
- 2.5% Hispanic
- 0.5% Native American
- 0.4% other

— Source: SPD annual reports

STANDING STRONG

Elite police unit works to turn routine traffic stops into safety for city



> Ahmad Mims conducts a more thorough search of an arrested individual's vehicle after tests came back positive for narcotics.
| Michael Santiago, They Wear Blue Photographer

By | Justin Mattingly
They Wear Blue reporter

12-officer team responds to shootings, but the daily grind returns biggest rewards

The familiar call goes out over the police radio: “Shots fired ...”

Within seconds, two Syracuse police officers turn around from their patrol on the West Side of the city and speed to the crime-plagued south. They weave in and out of traffic as they race to the address.

By the time the pair arrives, there’s a handful of others already there — with more on the way. They’re not wearing the normal blue police uniform but rather military green pants, sweatshirts with bullet-proof vests, and winter hats. The search for a fleeing suspect begins.

The officers are part of the Syracuse Police Department’s elite Crime Reduction Team, a 12-man force that targets areas with high crime rates and heavy gang activity. They’re experienced officers who rack up drugs, guns and cash from criminals.

“They’re the ones who are out there every day engaging the worst of the worst, the baddest of the bad, pushing them back off their heels, getting the guns off the street. They’re worth their weight in gold,” Syracuse Chief of Police Frank Fowler said.

Police cameras captured the recent call, near a corner store. The officers track the suspect through snow, and after conversations with neighbors identify the home

— two doors down from a house with an “O.G.s Against Gun Violence” sign in the window — where the suspect’s hiding and now cornered.

Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and no shoes, he’s led out of the house and stuffed into the back of a police car. The Crime Reduction Team, accompanied by a few regular patrol officers and a member of the New York State Police, begins the search for the weapon.

They find it tucked just inside a fence in the backyard of an abandoned home, and each member of the search gets a turn looking. One voices a clear message: “The CRT just f---ed you,” he declares.

Each team’s work starts with regular patrol — the cornerstone of their work. They drive through specific areas and look for clues during normal traffic stops, which make up about 90 percent of the duty. Members will write tickets and issue warnings the way they did in their earlier years on patrol, but that’s not the goal of these specially deployed officers, which is to turn routine stops in high-crime areas into arrests that catch criminals and seize drugs and weapons.

Just before 5 p.m. on a Saturday in February, two CRT officers pulled over a car on South Avenue for windows that looked to be too tinted. They ran the driver’s license and found that he had a record.

“You always have to be a little cautious on the job,” said CRT member Brendan Cope, the longest-tenured member of the team. “You don’t know what you’re coming across.”

This time, though, there was no altercation and no major suspicion. The driver was let off with a warning. But the stops do yield arrests and seizures.

“Policing nowadays with limited resources, you have to add either a data-driven strategy or a focused-deterrence strategy or even a combination of the two,” Fowler said. “You can’t effectively do focused deterrence without having a unit like the Crime Reduction Team.”

That strategy has worked: The team confiscated 408 grams of cocaine, 9,515 grams of marijuana, \$95,000

in cash and 108 illegal guns last year. The gun recoveries are nearly double compared to 2014 (56) and up from 62 in 2015.

In the team’s Erie Boulevard headquarters, the room is a wallpaper of pictures of guns seized over the years. There’s a running tally for each member and a stack of photos on a desk. They’ve run out of room on the wall.

They keep the photos as mementos.

“It’s the law,” said CRT member Ahmad Mims. “We’re here to enforce the law.”

Mims reflects on his administrative leave after firing gun April 22

By | Ashley Kang
The Stand director

It was the first time he had ever fired his gun while on duty — and the first time he ever feared for his life.

Asked if his police academy training had prepared him mentally for what happened April 22, the six weeks he spent on paid leave after it, and the persistent memories of it that will stick with him for months to come, Officer Ahmad Mims wavered.

“Yes and no,” he said finally in an interview in late July, after he’d been working for several weeks following mandatory leave while the department reviewed details of the routine traffic stop that escalated into shots fired.

Mims said the police academy for all new officers trains them on how to draw their weapon and when.

“The academy prepares you a little mentally,” he said, “but until you experience something like that ... anything that’s high stress, you just don’t know. You can’t control how your body or mind is going to react emotionally.”

The first few weeks were tough, he said. “You keep replaying everything over and over in your head.”

On April 22, Mims approached a Chevrolet Uplander van late in the afternoon during what he describes as a simple traffic stop, something he does up to 15 times a day. “On this particular day, the driver was in violation of parking in the middle of the road.”

After he told the driver to move, the incident quickly escalated.

“It was a complete 180,” Mims said.

The driver attempted to get away by backing up the block, in the process striking Mims and another officer with the van. Mims fired. The driver then led other police vehicles on a seven-mile chase before he was arrested.

“We had to do everything we could to stop the individual from causing any more harm to myself, my partners or other innocent people on the street,” Mims said.

Mims did say one training that helped was the Blue Courage course, a two-day workshop for officers focused on stress-management and well-being. He said he learned a 16-second breathing technique to cool him

down in moments of high-stress.

He and a half-dozen or so other officers have completed a weeklong “train the trainer” session to share what they learned with other officers.

“It’s something that you have to buy in to,” he said. “In my eyes, it really does work. It’s something I use every day and did after that incident.”

In the stress of the moment back in April, Mims says time slowed. His memory seemed to stretch the pace of events, which in reality took only a few minutes. This is known because city cameras captured the ordeal.

“After the initial encounter to the very end, in my sense of it, it seemed like 10 minutes.”

Mims said it was not until he read a news article on syracuse.com the week following the incident that he realized children were in the back of the vehicle. “I sit and think, for him ... to drive recklessly and hit officers with kids in the car, can you imagine what he would have done if he was by himself?”

Hearing that kids were in the vehicle, which Mims said had heavily tinted windows, hit close to home for him because he has a 5-year-old son of his own.

“It hit me emotionally just knowing that because I love kids. I stop every day when I’m working to talk to kids in the city.”

Support from his parents and spending extended time with his son, Ayden, who lives predominantly out of state, helped Mims get through the mandatory leave.

“We did everything in the world,” he said of two weeks he spent with his son. “I just thought about holding him, loving him, and spending my time with him. That’s what I needed.”

For the first couple days after returning to work June 27, he kept second-guessing himself.

“It was good to be back, but it was also nerve-racking. Yes, I know how to do this job, it’s something I have trained hard for, but still after being in a silo for so long, you start over-thinking ...

“And then walking up to a vehicle again and not knowing what is going to happen, that was the biggest (challenge).”

AFTER USE OF FORCE

When an officer uses force, the Syracuse Police Department policy is to conduct an in-house investigation to ensure officers acted appropriately, did not use excessive force or fire a weapon for no reason. “Investigators want to see what the circumstance were behind it,” Officer Ahmad Mims explained.

An officer remains on the sidelines for 72 hours after such an incident, then gives a statement to the chief and detectives. Next an officer waits to be cleared. This varies for each incident and depends on how long the investigation lasts. Internally, the department must clear the officer, and externally, the district attorney conducts a review.

Seeing a counselor is required. Officers may meet with the police chaplain or their own minister. Mims said he met with someone once or twice a week. He said the idea is to assure that the officer’s physical, emotional and mental state is good.

“The minister reports back to the chief if you are good and ready to go back to work or if you need more time.”



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