



---

**Current Edition: Friday, August 14, 2009**

## **Equal Opportunity for All Children**

By KHARY LAZARRE-WHITE

President Barack Obama once wrote: “There’s a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit — the ability to put ourselves in someone’s shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us.”

Empathy is a quality he sought and found when choosing Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. In today’s twisted political discourse, empathy was turned into a negative trait. As the cofounder of a youth organization and community organizer, I would suggest that empathy should be one of humanity’s guiding principles. As an attorney, I would submit that a judge who does not use empathy as one of the lenses through which to rule is not fit for the bench.

On Monday, August 17, The Brotherhood/Sister Sol (BHSS), a nationally recognized youth development organization, will host a benefit, Harlem Comes to the Vineyard, featuring Harvard Law School professor Lani Guinier, at the Farm Neck Golf Club in Oak Bluffs. We planned this event over a year ago, but in a twist of fate, next week President Obama arrives.

A close friend and I founded BHSS in 1995. We started the program in Providence as undergraduates at Brown University, and upon graduation built a formal program in Harlem. Today we provide comprehensive, holistic and long-term support services to black and Latino youth ages six to 21, many the most precariously situated children. We work to counteract poverty, racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia.

We provide rites of passage programming, after school care, counseling, summer camps, job training, college preparation, employment opportunities, activist training and community organizing, an environmental education program, and legal representation. We expose our youth to new opportunities through wilderness retreats, cultural performances, college tours, and monthlong intensive study programs to Africa and Latin America. We publish curriculum and our members’ writings and train educators throughout the nation.

The problems our youth face are daunting. They do not have access to healthy food or decent health care. Too many receive insufficient support at home; some

are homeless. Jobs are scarce. The national unemployment rate is around nine per cent, though half of black men age 18 and over in New York city are unemployed. Violence and drug use is rampant in their communities and invasive policing is the response. It is the rare young man with whom I work who has not been stopped and frisked by the police. In fact I have been stopped myself twice in recent years. In our city over 500,000 people are stopped each year and frisked, the vast majority black and brown men. Only 10 per cent have broken a law.

Education is an even greater systemic challenge. There are 1.1 million students in the New York city public school system, but the majority of our students attend failing schools where there are no art and writing programs, no individual guidance and a bleak record of sending children to college. In our city the high school graduation rate hovers near 50 per cent, though for black and Latino males in our community it is below 30 per cent.

Even our members who make it to college often find themselves without money for books, school supplies and clothes. Some have had to drop out because they couldn't get student loans. When university endowments fell with the rest of the economy, our students were told to find private loans. In our community of West Harlem the mean annual family income is \$27,000 with over a third of residents living below the poverty level. Where is a 19-year old, with no credit history, and a parent with poor credit supposed to get a private loan? And so, they either drop out of school or our program provides the scholarship. The faces and stories of these young people, their difficulty navigating a path to stability, never leave me.

And yet, in the face of these realities, after 15 year of doing this work, 95 per cent of our members are in college or working full-time; 88 per cent have graduated from high school. None are incarcerated. The U.S. has one of the highest teenage birth rates of industrialized nations and in New York city it is 9.4 per cent. Less than two per cent of our members have had children before the age of 18.

We have based our youth leadership model on the ideal that young peoples' minds can be transformed and their future possibilities expanded. Our children are brilliant young people, their minds filled with intellectual passion — they crave knowledge and possess powerful voices. It was once said that all people need bread and roses: sustenance for bodies and minds. This is what we do: provide bread and also roses.

We raise expectations, we expect excellence and we provide support, opportunities, discipline and guidance. However, in seeking to truly organize young people, to help foster social change, we help them to understand that systemic, historic conditions and policies have created the symptoms they face. They become youth with a critical analysis, a commitment to social change, and question: Why are we poor? Why is our education substandard? Why are our streets filled with drugs and violence? Why don't we have access to healthy food and secure housing? Why have our opportunities been so grossly limited, our

access restricted? In framing such questions, vulnerable youth become strong.

After President Obama gave his speech on race in Philadelphia we read it with our students. They were moved by his words and excited by his possible election. One young woman was unmoved: “So what if he is elected, we’ll still be poor,” she said. She has experienced the worst our society has to offer — several family members incarcerated, others selling drugs, death of many teenaged friends, having a child at 14 — yet she had the fortitude to join our organization searching for a way out.

America cannot be what it ought to be until all our children have a chance. There are those who do not believe in this empathetic vision. I believe they are in the minority. The majority are people of good faith and moral conviction and know the lesson of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who said to his children, “I’m going to work and do everything I can do to see that you get a good education. But I don’t ever want you to forget that there are millions of God’s children who will not and cannot get a good education, and I don’t want you feeling that you are better than they are. For you will never be what you ought to be until they are what they ought to be.”

We have just elected a civil rights lawyer, a community organizer from the south side of Chicago, a teacher who brings an international perspective to the White House. But as he has consistently said, “I’m asking you to believe, not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington . . . I’m asking you to believe in yours.” We believe in the power of our young people to change their own reality and the nation’s. We believe in empathy, in the hard work that is necessary and essential for change. We are in this together.

*Khary Lazarre-White is the cofounder and executive director of the Brotherhood/Sister Sol, a New York city-based youth development program. The Monday night event at Farm Neck with guest speaker Lani Guinier is from 6 to 8 p.m. Tickets begin at \$100. To purchase a ticket go to [brotherhood-sistersol.org/vineyard](http://brotherhood-sistersol.org/vineyard).*