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Inspired by their mentors, Harlem group's D.R.E.A.M. girls are bonded for life!

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Members of the DREAM chapter on the front steps of Brotherhood/Sister Sol's Harlem offices. Left to right: Celeste Bond, Yessivette Ducasse, Rhanice Minton, Natalia Gonzales-Mañon, Ariana Hammonds, Tomme Garvin, Shalena Pope. photo: Rob Waters

By [Rob Waters](#)

It's not hard to spot the three-story brownstone where The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, a 20-year-old youth development organization, looks after and helps to raise some of the luckiest young people in Harlem. Walk by at the right time, shortly after New York City schools let out in the afternoon, and the place is buzzing with activity. Elementary-school kids bound up the stairs, pass through the multi-colored front door and run out the back into the Frank White Community Garden, a site the organization manages on behalf of the neighborhood.

In the garden, the kids zoom by beds of basil, collards, and chili peppers, dash across a wooden gazebo and around a small pond, tag and dodge each other as the enticing

smells of a “Tacos Mexicanos” truck waft into the garden from across 143rd street. On the side of the garden, murals made of plywood are painted with colorful graphics, maps of Africa and the Caribbean and well-chosen quotations:

“I change myself, I change the world.”—Gloria Anzaldúa

“The moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.” —James Baldwin

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” —Mohandas Gandhi

The kids, aged 7 to 12, romp under the watchful eyes of Nicholas Peart, a 27-year-old staff member who has been part of the organization since he was 15. Now he monitors his young charges, pausing occasionally to referee and frequently to give hugs, and tells me about the impact of the mentoring he received from staff members.

When he was a teenager, the program offered him a “safe space from the things I was faced growing up in Harlem,” Peart says. It also “challenged my definition of manhood and my way of thinking” about women. “You don’t realize how offensive you can be—and the impact of being offensive—until you really reflect,” he says.

At 3:30, the kids head inside to a first-floor study room for snacks of water, bananas and Cheerios before getting started on their homework. Associate Director Wendy DeJesus apologizes to one boy that she didn’t have time to prepare the usual salad and protein that day. “Thank you for my hug,” she tells another. At one of the tables, three girls work on their math homework while 7-year-old Franklin leafs through a book, “It’s A New Year.”

Solo portraits of many of the children line a wall, part of an art project that taught the children how to convert photographs of themselves, taken by a staff member, into stylized images—a process DeJesus tells me was inspired by the late New York artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. As DeJesus shows me another series of drawings—part of a project called “Invest in Me,” inspired by Frida Kahlo and Marian Wright Edelman—the room suddenly gets quiet. “They know homework time is quiet time,” DeJesus explains.

An hour later, in a cozy meeting room on the second floor, a very different scene unfolds, as if we’ve traveled ten years ahead in time. Eight 16- and 17-year-old high-school girls plop down on a couch and armchairs for a group interview. They are part of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol’s Rites of Passage program, which brings young men or young women together in single-gender chapters to bond, learn, and support each other under the mentorship of two staff members. Interview might be the wrong word for what follows. This group scarcely needs to be prompted with questions in order to talk, laugh, cry, shout, interrupt and finish each other’s sentences—and to share their love for each other and for the program they all say has profoundly shaped them.

These girls on the cusp of adulthood do seem Destined to be Remembered for Excellence, Achievements, and Magnificence—as they declared when they chose D.R.E.A.M. as the name of their chapter six years ago. Several of the girls have been coming to the afterschool or summer programs of Bro/Sis, as they all call it, since they were 5 or 6. A decade later, they are fiercely connected to each other and to the program that has been one of the most consistent parts of their lives. They even



maintain a text-message group chat to help them keep in touch with each other.

“I’ve been coming here the majority of my life,” says Celeste Bond. “Bro-Sis didn’t change me, exactly, it more like raised me. I’m the way I am because of the values and moral guidance of being in this organization for 11 years.” So what are those values?

“From like 6 years old, we learned to respect

everyone, whether they’re a different color or a boy or girl,” Celeste says. “We also learned to respect adults because nowadays younger children are kinda disrespectful.” A less popular early lesson was the content of their snacks—they were given only healthy food and none of the soda, chips or candy they really wanted.

The program also has bonded these girls—and for life, they insist. “Every girl in this group I could probably write a whole book about and just say how much I love or appreciate you,” says Micah Marte. “A lot of times, when you’re in high school, you tend to break yourself down over little things. Being in a group like Sister Sol, it builds me up. If you have people around you to tell you you’re great, you don’t need to have a 98 to know how great you are.”

“This is not just friends for high school and then you leave and then you forget about them,” adds Celeste. “This is, like, your sisters and you come back and they’re still going to be your sisters.”

Today, the girls also confess to feeling stressed. They’re all deep into the process of applying to colleges—for some, the first in their family to do so. “You see this pimple right here?” asks Yessivette Ducasse. “That’s a stress pimple—the first pimple I’ve ever gotten in my entire life. And it’s just because school is just so stressful. Just trying to keep my grades up, trying to get all my homework done. And I have to finish my personal statement due tomorrow.”

The girls have visited colleges on tours organized by The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, worked with program staff members and tutors to prepare for the upcoming SAT exams, and labored over their college application essays with the help of professional volunteers recruited by the program. “The college trips that I’ve taken with Bro/Sis made me decide which colleges I want to go to,” says Ariana Hammonds.

The girls’ experience with Brotherhood/Sister Sol has not only prepared them for life and given them a strong sense of ethics and justice, it’s also given them a rich trove of material to write about in their essays—like the voyages they’ve taken from an early age, their camping trips in New York and New Jersey, their visits to city museums and even journeys to foreign countries.

“We went on trips to places you would never think inner-city kids go to—I’ve probably been to almost every museum in this city because of this organization,” says Ariana. “And every amusement park, too!” another girl blurts out, to a round of laughter.

Over the past two years, they’ve gone to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Ghana and Brazil as part of the organization’s International Study Program—trips that profoundly changed their views of other countries, and of their own. “My whole stereotypical thinking changed,” says Ariana. “I had this image like Ghana-Africa-starvation based on what they show you in commercials. But when you get over there, it’s totally different.”



“And people are so nice to you,” interjects Tomme Garvin. “Like nobody yells at you—unless you do something bad. You see people walking down the street and you say good morning in their language and it’s so nice. And it’s like, no, America is not the center of attention; there’s a whole world out there, not just America.”

Celeste gets excited just thinking about it. “It changed me,” she says. “The whole learning-to-adapt thing. But also it changed what I want to major in when I go to college.” “YES!” several girls exclaim in unison. “Now I want to study international relations,” Celeste continues. “I realize I love meeting people outside the US. It’s like a different vibe you get in other countries and I feed off that. It’s like my drug!”

Still, for these girls, the International Study Program, or ISP, is just a small part of what makes “Bro/Sis” so meaningful. “We highlight ISP because it’s so extraordinary,” says Celeste. “But Sister Sol will leave me crying. It’s so deep and that’s what really morphed us into being women, sisters and leaders.”

At this, Yessivette snaps her fingers rapidly (a signal, the girls tells me, of enthusiastic agreement with the speaker). The discussion moves to their roles as young women and what they’ve learned to expect and demand from young men, and from themselves.

“My standards are kind of higher since I’ve been here,” says Celeste. “When I see a guy disrespecting me, I know what I was taught here and I’m not going to put up with that. Boys in the Brotherhood program here are taught the same values I was taught. They know they can’t be the typical stereotype of men that disrespect women or don’t see the strength in most women.”

“I’m not going to be in that stereotype of women that are just going to be that stay-at-home mom doing nothing but cleaning house and watching the kids,” adds Ariana. “I’m going to have a job outside of my house and you too are going to be cooking, you’re going to be watching the kids, you’re going to be washing clothes.”

The D.R.E.A.M. girls credit their primary mentors—DeJesus, the organization’s associate director, and Cidra M. Sebastien, its associate executive director—for showing them how to be strong, competent and caring young women, and for being present in the lives of each of them whenever they needed it.

“They know us personally, they know our parents, they know our cousins and they know our grandma; everyone we’re associated with, they know,” Yessivette says. “If there’s something going on with me—like if me and Ariana are going through a fight—Wendy’s going to speak to my mom about it. And they’re going to sit us down and we’re going to have to sit there and figure out what’s going on.”

Having gotten so much from each other and The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, the D.R.E.A.M. girls say they’re also determined to give back as they move into adulthood. Celeste and Ariana have already begun to do that as members of the Young Women’s Advisory Council for New York City’s Young Women’s Initiative, an effort launched by the city council to support young women and combat racial and gender inequality. “I want to help more women come together,” Ariana says. “I know how to be a woman, sister and leader. I can encourage other women to find support from each other and build sisterhood bonds.”



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