

JENNER ACADEMY OF THE ARTS

1119 NORTH CLEVELAND AVENUE

CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOL
2000

Pictured: (from left)
Ericka Moore, Deborah
Hope, Anita Walker

Pictured: (from left)
Dinah Towns, mother
Treyonda Towns, &
Diamond Towns

PHOTO BY AMANDA ANDERSON



I'm ready to fight. I found what I'm fighting for. I've buried over half of my family to violence. Good has to come from my pain.

—Deborah Hope, Cabrini Mother

wanted to help her neighbors “get away from it all, even if just for a day.” She used her resources to get local companies to donate food, and the Jesse White Tumblers performed. Deborah can't remember anyone being shot that day. She plans to do it again this summer.

Treyonda Towns brought the community together after a violent relationship ended her daughter's life. Towns organized a community vigil for healing so that her daughter's light and others “may always shine.”

These mothers have managed to channel their pain and deposit their nurturing nature back into the community—no small feat. Some members of the Cabrini group joined other groups and participated in a prayer walk; every morning at 6:55 a.m. they walked around the Jenner school and prayed for the safety of their children.

When it became apparent that minority students were being suspended at a higher rate than others under Chicago Public Schools' zero-tolerance policy, the Cabrini group joined a number of community activists and organizations and championed a cause to change the language of the policy and find alternate solutions.

One solution came in the form of restorative justice. This program encourages authorities to take a deeper look into why a child misbehaves and find options other than immediately dismissing him or her from school.

Through the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, most of the mothers in the Cabrini group were relocated to mixed-income apartments. Some have moved as far as the South Side. But home is where the heart is. Their blood and tears enrich Cabrini's soil.

The memories of lost loved ones surround the area, so the women leave their new apartments with fancy landscaping and modern architecture and return to a place the rest of the world wants to forget, a place plagued by violence and seemingly destined for doom.

This room of mothers will change that. Nothing is more powerful than a mother's love, and that love will stop at nothing to keep the children of Cabrini safe.

Cover Stories

Cabrini Moms share hope

By Beshanda Spencer
StreetWise Contributor

Their meetings open with a prayer. Each woman holds another's hand and forms a circle of trust, friendship, and understanding. With bowed heads, they give thanks and praise. Everyone is then given the opportunity to talk about her week. At this particular meeting, stories center on home-cooked meals and grandchildren. The women smile upon hearing each other's memories.

Everyone except Deborah Hope.

She couldn't hold back her tears. She'd lost three family members on a violent weekend in Chicago during which 40 people were shot. While others were spending time with their families, she was planning funerals for hers, a task all too familiar to this particular circle of friends.

The atmosphere in the classroom at Jenner Elementary Academy of the Arts, which serves as the weekly meeting place for Cabrini Mothers in Power, changed. Each mother suddenly focused on Deborah.

Some zeroed in on her story, while others looked past her, perhaps remembering when they buried their own child. Several summoned their inner strength to fight back tears. Others simply shook their heads in frustration. They'd heard similar stories—and lived through

them—far too many times.

With red eyes and puffy cheeks, Deborah captivated her peers. But it wasn't her agony that took center stage—it was her strength. Even in despair she had hope. In weakness she exuded strength.

Then, with a swoop of her right arm across her face, Deborah wiped it all away and declared, “I'm ready to fight. I found what I'm fighting for. I've buried over half of my family to violence. Good has to come from my pain.”

And just like that, it was time to work.

Cabrini Mothers in Power is a group of women who meet in the Near North Side public housing project to take responsibility for their community. There is an array of matriarchs in this group: old-school mothers whose children had to be home before the streetlights came on, grandmothers who share wisdom with their children and their children's children, and new mothers who absorb every bit of knowledge they can from the group.

Each mother's individual story has brought her here. The women have experienced losses that no mother should ever know. Each one has a special gift for loving others, and they continue to love despite their pain.

Ironically, Deborah organized a Day of Peace for the community just last summer. Tired of the violence and everyday struggles, she