

THE RICHEST TREASURES EAST OF THE RIVER

Coming home to give back to the community

BY KHADIJAH ALI-COLEMAN

Ashley Spears sports a shamrock tattoo, a nod to her African-American, Italian and Irish ancestry; and an elite distinction as salutatorian for the class of 2006 at Anacostia High School. Clearly, Spears is not your everyday local teen. Self-discipline and emotional support from family helped Spears achieve academic excellence while she struggled with extraordinary hardships that included her father's

death and her mother's tribulations with drug use. Despite her personal tragedies, Spears plans to attend college and pursue a career within her community, so she can, in her words, "give back."

Spears represents a growing trend of young and talented east of the river natives who are passing up lucrative jobs for careers in education, advocacy and government that support their home community. These positions are commonly recognized as less profitable when compared to the salaries of surgeons,

lawyers, engineers, and the often glorified lifestyles of gangstas, dealers and pimps. Yet many east of the river natives, like Spears, revel in the satisfaction that they are doing something positive.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," says Tendani Mpulubusi, 24, a youth development specialist for the Far Southeast Collaborative. A fan of rapper Snoop Dog while growing up, Mpulubusi recalls that the heroes in his neighborhood were the ones on the corner "pimped out" and dealing. Despite having a mother who was an artist working with the Smithsonian museums, he remembers that the negativity around him had a stronger pull during the early part of his life. Most people didn't support his vision to be noted in the community for doing good things and pulled him off track. He remembers that eventually, he started to focus on his talent for art and distanced himself from the street-life with its promise of quick money and high stakes.

"[After a while] I was at home working on my clothes and getting my stuff together," said Mpulubusi.

Today, Mpulubusi is a fashion designer and visual artist who has had his clothing worn by Miss Black USA 1996, radio personality Jeanie Jones and different recording artists. His artwork was recognized by Mayor Anthony Williams and showcased throughout DC. Mpulubusi shook off naysayers by focusing on his inner talents. Studying African-American history at Prince George's County Community College, helped him share his knowledge with local youth through his high-profile position at the Far Southeast Collaborative.

"I connect with the youth because I can look like them and relate to them without preaching or talking down to them. Leaders weren't doing that when

I was growing up," Mpulubusi says. Successfully coordinating such feats as the 40 Days of Peace initiative currently taking place east of the river and balancing group sessions with various youth groups throughout the Southeast area, Mpulubusi admits that youth work is often a thankless job that demands patience, thick skin and flexibility.

"When you work with young people, things are bound to change constantly. You also will have people not giving you credit for things that you make happen. [Ultimately], you just have to deal with it. It's really all about [the youth]."

Mpulubusi credits having his friend and mentor Rayshon, uncles and knowledge of his cultural history as the basis of his strong commitment to stay within DC and work with young people. "When young people know about themselves and see what they are capable of, they do great things. As it is now, all they know is that everyone that tried to be a leader in our history was killed and our history began at slavery. When I work with [young people], I like to show them that they come from greatness reaching back to Africa. It's in their history." Putting on hiatus a promising career in visual art and fashion design, Mpulubusi has focused his energies on youth work, leaving little time to do much else.

"It can get busy," he says with satisfaction.

Marquita Siler, a vibrant thirty-something year old, who is a doctoral student, masseur, social worker and poet regionally known as "Storm," is another professional who has come back to her hometown east of the river to work in the social services sector. She has had opportunities to live in other locations and follow other career paths, but Siler admits: "I have always wanted to help



Derrick Wilson's upbringing in Paradise Manor drove him towards working with youth



Tendani Mpulubusi, with artist pals passes his talents onto young people in the Lincoln Heights public housing project

people and thought of myself as the champion for the underdog. I guess when I look at [the people I serve] I see what my life could have been if my grandparents had not stepped in and showed me love and gave me hope for the future; so, I try to give to them what my grandparents gave to me-- a chance."

Because of the chance her grandparents gave her, Siler has many educational achievements under her belt. She received a Bachelor's degree in psychology from Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, GA in the early 90's and lived in Georgia for a few years before deciding to move back to DC. A few years after returning to DC, she earned a graduate certificate in Job Development and Placement, and a Master's degree in Education and Human Development from George Washington University while working in the nonprofit sector. Currently, she is finishing up studies to earn a Doctorate of Psychology in clinical psychology at Argosy University in Arlington, VA. In light of her stellar educational achievement, Siler's goals are set on planning how she can bring her skills and services to those in her immediate east of the river area before branching out nationally.

Raised by a teen mother in Southeast, she remembers the disruption she felt as a child, shuttled between her mother and maternal grandparents. She

credits artistic outlets and community service as things that helped her become who she is today. Today, she works with people throughout the area to help them explore their own ways to deal with stressful situations. Creating Dreams in Motion-- an entertainment vehicle that coordinates local poetry nights and

showcases undiscovered talent, and Visions of Serenity-- a wellness business that provides relaxation and physical therapy, Siler is investing her skills in areas often unexplored.

"I teach at-risk youth to channel their feelings through creative expressions instead of violent tragedies," Siler says. "I want to help to change awareness and stigmas associated with mental illness in the African American community. I want to continue researching alternative and innovative approaches to treating disorders like anxiety and depression; which often goes undiagnosed and untreated in many ethnic populations, especially African American communities."

Growing up on Fitch Street in Southeast before heading to college and

moving back to South Capitol street as an adult, Siler has strong opinions about what is going on around her. She recognized many inconsistencies with services offered to DC families when she saw services offered in other areas she had lived. Siler is discontent with what she sees as growing apathy around her but is

strong in her reserve to offer the area something different.

"I am not content with people who complain about all the problems in DC but are not offering any solutions, and I am praying everyday that I do not become one of them," says Siler.

Providing a sounding-board for such discontent within an artistic context, Siler adds to her resume of youth work a strong following in entertainment and art. She coordinates monthly poetry slams where locals can share their artistry and activism in one swoop. Bonnie Duffy-Page, a grandmother who resides in Southeast and is a regular at Siler's monthly slams enjoys the release she gets when able to read her poetry "I just love it," she says. Choosing different venues

to host her event, Siler boasts a loyal following that supports her efforts. Thankful for the support, Siler credits Bonnie and others like her as "very important and supportive in my endeavors."

Derrick Wilson, a native of the infamous Paradise Manor complex in Ward 7 has come full-circle. He has worked in the nonprofit sector for over seven years and worked briefly with Siler before she began her own business ventures. He compares his foray into the nonprofit world as more of a divine intervention than a response to a challenging childhood. Prior to working at Covenant House Washington with Siler, Wilson was succeeding in the corporate world, becoming a manager in sales. He had attended school in North Carolina and had dreams to work outside of DC.

"I was working with Blockbuster, managing stores and moving up very quickly," Wilson remembers. The increasing responsibility was coupled with a fattening paycheck, but Wilson admits he wasn't really feeling it. "But I was really good at it," he says.

Wilson, 37, was diagnosed with cancer in the midst of his rise at Blockbuster and forced to slow down to regain his health and alleviate stress that was at the root of his health issues. He was urged by a friend to apply to work at Covenant House Washington for a vacant administrative assistant position, and within a year was promoted to residential advisor. Over the years, Wilson moved up, ultimately moving into his current role as an assistant program director of Covenant House Washington's youth program Teen Life Choices. Affectionately called "Mr. Covenant House Washington" by his co-workers, for his ready smile and high energy, Wilson has boast-

ed cancer-free days-with only one brief relapse that forced him to re-evaluate his chosen profession path.

"Everything happens for a reason. At Blockbuster, I wasn't really helping anyone. What I do now impacts someone's life every single day," Wilson says. In addition to managing a youth center that serves dozens of young people aged 11-17 years-old each day after-school and during the summer, Wilson is a project coordinator who supervises staff, plans special events and mentors youth in Ward 7. With no plans to transition into another field anytime soon, Wilson is content with where he is right now.

"Where do I see myself five years from now," asks Wilson. "Happy." ■

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- Tendani Mpulubusi, 24, Youth Development Specialist