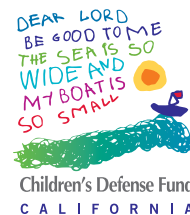




# In other words: Stories from Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Sites in California





“In Other Words: Stories from Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Sites in California” seeks to capture the uniqueness and transformative power of *CDF Freedom Schools* through those who live it – the scholars, servant leader interns, trainers, parents, and administrators.

Few programs are as life changing for children, youth, and families as the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools® program. In 2016, the Children’s Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA) supported 27 CDF Freedom School program sites, including four at juvenile detention camps, while serving approximately 1,800 children and hundreds of families. *CDF Freedom Schools* – the vision of Marian Wright Edelman – are in essence

an educational paradigm shift. It’s a powerful experience where students of color, primarily African-American and Latino, engage in culturally competent instruction with a goal of building strong, literate, and confident children prepared to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, nation and the world.

Each morning at a CDF Freedom School begins with Harambee, meaning “to pull together” in Swahili. And if you have participated in Harambee, you will know that in addition to storytelling, reading aloud, motivational cheers, songs and chants, the scholars and servant leader interns provide “recognitions” – positive affirmations for something that has been done to elevate the CDF Freedom School experience. Well, I have a recognition! I want to recognize each of the program sites in California for their tireless dedication to *CDF Freedom Schools* and improving the lives of children!

I have a recognition! I want to recognize Saira Soto (CDF-CA Program Director), Cadonna Dory (CDF-CA Communications Manager), and Hanif Houston (CDF-CA Digital Content Manager) for their hard work in bringing this compilation to life.

The *CDF Freedom Schools* program is a key part of Children Defense Fund - California’s work to ensure a level playing field for all children. I invite you to learn more about the *CDF Freedom Schools* program and contact us if you are interested in hosting a *CDF Freedom Schools* program, volunteering at a location, or providing financial support to ensure that each summer young people have an opportunity to learn and grow.

Onward,

**Alex Johnson**

Executive Director, Children’s Defense Fund-California

*“I learn more here than in regular school. The books are different and teachers are different. It’s just better.”*

- **Leilani Garcia, age 10, scholar, Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) *CDF Freedom Schools* site**

Freedom Schools were designed in 1964 to keep Black children and youths out of harm’s way and give them a richer education experience than Mississippi public schools offered them. Freedom Summer volunteers were trained to teach in these “schools,” held in church basements, on back porches, in parks, and even under trees. They provided reading instruction, a humanities curriculum including creative writing, and a general math and science curriculum. Additionally, they taught subjects the public schools did not, including Black history and constitutional rights, and covered the freedom movement in detail – encouraging students to be independent thinkers, problem solvers and to become agents of social change in their own communities. More than 3,000 children, youth, and some adults attended the Freedom Schools that summer.



Thirty one years later, under the guise of the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program, the work continues in strong partnership with community leaders to build strong, literate, and empowered children prepared to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, nation, and world. By providing summer and after-school literacy enrichment for children, K-12, including those in juvenile detention facilities, who might otherwise not have access to enrichment opportunities, *CDF Freedom Schools* play a much needed role in helping curb summer learning loss and closing opportunity gaps. The program offers children safe spaces where they are taught by college students from their communities and who look like them. The program’s integrated reading curriculum is common core aligned and includes thoughtfully chosen, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant books. Scholars receive two meals and a snack every day in the summer program. Parents are engaged through weekly workshops and scholars are taught nonviolent conflict resolution, critical thinking skills and similar to 1964, through literature, and by engaging in community focused social action projects they learn that they are not citizens in waiting but can make a difference right now. Children are encouraged to dream, set goals for themselves, and cultivate positive attitudes and high expectations.

The *Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools* program is making a positive impact by helping children read, write, think critically and feel hopeful about their futures; and helping parents support their children in and outside of the classroom. Since 1995, more than 137,000 K-12 children and youth have experienced *CDF Freedom Schools* and more than 16,000 college students, recent college graduates, probation officers, and teachers have been trained to deliver this empowering model.

The poems and reflections in this publication offer a glimpse of the *CDF Freedom Schools* philosophy and speak to the relevance and need for these culturally enriching programs—both in 1964 and in these critical times. This publication reveals what is often missed by traditional evaluations—the life affirming experiences of staff, parents, and scholars. The *Freedom Schools* “way” uniquely engages children and their communities to believe: *“I Can and Must Make a Difference in My: Self, Family, Community, Country and World, with Hope, Education and Action.”*

**Saira Soto**

Director of Programs, Children’s Defense Fund-California



## Love at First chant



### Christina & Iliana Estrada

*Scholars, Read Lead CDF Freedom Schools site*

Maria Estrada remembers having to argue with her two daughters when it came to reading. They would complain and get attitudes when she or their father would try to get them to pick up a book.

So when Maria heard about the *CDF Freedom Schools*, a summer enrichment program aimed at getting kids to enjoy reading, she thought it was perfect for her girls. In the summer of 2013, she drove down to Hellen Keller Elementary School in Lynwood and signed them up.

The thought of going to a reading program did not sound like fun to Christina, who was 12, and the then 7-year-old Iliana. In fact, like many others, they were reluctant and felt the activities they did first thing every morning were a bit corny. These morning activities are done during Harambee, which means “let’s pull together” in Swahili.” Harambee is like a pep rally and involves lots of singing, dancing, and chanting to celebrate and affirm every scholar.

“At first you can see the kids looking around embarrassed, trying to see whose watching them,” said Juan Carlo Lugo, site coordinator at the Helen Keller Elementary site. “But then they get into it and have fun.”

It only took a couple of days for Iliana and Christina to fall in love with the program. In fact, both girls said Harambee was their favorite part. As for reading, Christina said the love is still developing but she admits that the program has helped her tremendously.

Now in high school, Christina is no longer a participant of the program but she does volunteer. On one afternoon, she assisted a teacher in a first grade class.

“I had to read to them,” she said. “And it actually felt good. Now I know I can read to other people.”

Over the past three years, a more radical change has happened with Iliana. Maria says Iliana is a much better reader than her sister was at her age, and she now enjoys reading.

Crystal Leon, who was Iliana’s teacher in the program for two summers, said the scholar’s attitude toward reading changed completely. “During the first year, she would complain every time we would have them read. But by the end of the summer, when we would finish a book as a group, she would go and pick up the same book and read it again on her own.”

*“Every day we get to do different activities like cooking and swimming; and the books, the books we read here are fun.”*

**Fernanda Pedraza, age 10**

**Scholar Stephen S. Wise CDF Freedom Schools site**



## In Their Own Words

### INELIGIBILITY

Ineligibility  
That’s where I stand  
But I’m not alone  
About 103 million people in the U.S. stand  
where I stand

The homeless  
The felons  
The children  
The undocumented  
Stand with me

While we stand together  
We watch  
as the eligible  
make the decisions for us.

We watch  
As the eligibles  
make change

For better  
or for worse.

We shall not say a word  
because it would  
not be heard

For we are the ineligible  
That stand together  
but alone.

*A poem by Takara Hasiem, junior servant leader intern,  
Community Coalition CDF Freedom Schools site*



# creating a Movement

## Pastor Norman Johnson

Executive Director, New Christian Fellowship CDF Freedom Schools site

In 1999, a group of individuals representing seven churches flew to Nashville to participate in the annual training for *CDF Freedom Schools*. Pastor Norman Johnson of New Christian Fellowship Church in South Los Angeles was among that group.

“I believed it was important then and it is just as important now, if not more so,” the pastor said. But keeping the program going has been a challenge for churches. In fact, he said, New Christian Fellowship is the



only church remaining from the original seven that still hosts a *CDF Freedom Schools* site.

The challenge is finding money to pay for it.

“It’s an expensive program to run,” Rev. Johnson said. “But it is so worth it. And that is why we do what we can to keep it going.”

In addition to providing a safe place for young children to go and instilling a love of reading, one of Rev. Johnson’s favorite components of the program is the idea behind servant leaders.

“We are helping college people figure out what they want to do in life,” he said. “It’s important for them to know the value of service to the community, not just a job.”

New Christian Fellowship Church has been offering summer programs for youth since the 1990s. So when they heard about *CDF Freedom Schools* – a program with historical and cultural significance with a strong reading curriculum – the church’s leadership staff thought it was perfect for their community.

Since implementing the program, the needs of the community have grown tremendously and so has the role of the program, Rev. Johnson said. So many of the children come from low-income homes headed by single mothers; many of our males are incarcerated; and our youth are exposed to social ills like drug addiction, homelessness and violence, he added.

“The reading program is the core of the program but there’s so much more that we are dealing with,” the pastor said. “The question is, how do we use this program to create a movement for young people?”

The first step, he said, is keeping the program going at his church. Pastor Johnson is not sure how long they will be able to sustain it but he is committed to doing everything he can.

*“This program gives us a sense of community, belonging and hope, and it’s bringing everyone together. All of this helps create a foundation so they know who they are, where they came from, what is important and what we are fighting for as a community.”*

**- Jamie Kyle, Site Coordinator, Read Lead CDF Freedom Schools site**



# In Their Own Words

## VOTING

103 million people in the United States are unable to voice their opinions by voting. Imagine the feeling of hopelessness. The looks of defeat on their faces, as politics are being spoken of. Minorities, unable to help, to be engaged in what’s going on, because they’re told they’re too young, that they’ll have a turn when they’re legal – 18.

Will they?

What if they become homeless?

What if they have a record?

What if they are undocumented?

What if?

They’re turned away. They take one look at them and say, “you have no voting rights” – making them feel less of a person. That shouldn’t be allowed, but it is.

What’s crazy is that no one thinks about their children when it comes to politics. They think about how it will benefit children later on. People brag and talk to others about how they want nothing but the best for our children, yet they don’t let them make decisions that impact their futures.

People do it, not realizing that the 103 million that aren’t allowed to vote should be able to, not realizing that you are judging and labeling those not worthy of that. Or maybe you do realize, but can’t find the power to stop. Every decision you make impacts, affects, and creates what our future will look like.

So, vote — yes, — but for the right reasons. It’s not just to determine who is president, but for other policies and propositions being passed.

Vote, not just your lives, but for the lives of minorities who aren’t able to.

*An essay by Jaquay Jaquay Jones, junior servant leader intern, Community Coalition CDF Freedom Schools site*



# A Life-changing Program



## Nicole and Brandon Soriano

Site Coordinator and Servant Leader Intern, Stephen S. Wise CDF Freedom Schools site

When Jacques Soriano heard about *CDF Freedom Schools* from a rabbi at his synagogue, he immediately thought of his college-age children.

Volunteering and being of service to those in need are values that he and his wife, Marla, believe in and instilled in their son and daughter. And *CDF Freedom Schools* seemed like a perfect opportunity to put those values into practice. Jacques was not wrong.

"It's a life-changing program," Jacques said. He said it is obviously a great program for the young scholars but the couple has seen extraordinary growth in their own children, Nicole and Brandon.

Nicole, 22, was the site coordinator at Milken Community Middle School, a *CDF Freedom Schools* site ran by Stephen S. Wise Temple; her 19-year-old brother, Brandon, served as a Servant Leader Intern at the same site. Like many siblings, Nicole and Brandon love each other but didn't feel they had much in common. But after going to Tennessee to attend the annual training for the program, their relationship evolved.

"My sister and I used to fight a lot like most siblings do," Brandon said. "But this summer, in Tennessee, things changed. We are actually friends now."

Seeing the change, Marla was at a loss for words.

"I don't know what happened but when they came back, they were very, very connected," she said.

Both Nicole and Brandon said the trip was an unforgettable experience. Learning the history of the program, what it has done for youth, and the impact they can make as ambassadors was truly overwhelming and powerful.

"I think I had the best 10 days of my entire life in Tennessee," Nicole said. "It was long and tiring. But there wasn't one day that I wasn't thankful for every single piece of information I learned. Every single workshop I attended, I got something out of."

Nicole said *CDF Freedom Schools* has made her rethink what she wants to do in her life. Just seeing the impact she made on scholars this summer, Nicole said she wants to continue to focus on underserved communities in the future. In the fall, she returned to school to pursue her goal of becoming a therapist, with a focus on youth in the foster care system.

*"One of the things I've learned through Freedom Schools is you can't listen to what negative people have to say. You are going to have problems but you have to figure out a positive way to solve them."*

- Lacey R., age 18, scholar, LACOE CDF Freedom Schools site (Camp Scott)



## In Their Own Words

### FREEDOM

Five months in camp and I'm a ace it like a champ  
Cut off the groupies so I won't come back  
I'm a be somebody, done being a loner  
Days passing fast so I know my freedom coming closer  
Look I go to Freedom School where they  
say reading books is cool

Nowadays we don't have to read, to busy  
focused on tryna be seen  
They say they gone get it together just like me, but one thing I learned is  
that talk is cheap

Talking strong but your brain so weak  
I got the brains, I got potential in my name  
Promised to by my momma I wouldn't gangbang  
She knew I was running game  
I'm sorry that I put you through all this crazy pain only thing I gained was  
a group of lames

So I got it together and started making As  
Every day I scream "FREEDOM" till my lungs hurt,  
no more wasting time I gotta put in the work  
I pray a lot cause I did a lot of dirt, then I found myself in church

#### (Chorus)

Freedom school, early in the morning singing chants is what we used to

Gotta run my program yeah that's what I gotta do  
I never meant to do the worst, I should have graduated first but I love me

I'm a hustle til I get free, and learn the most before they let me leave, and  
drive past the haters that dissed me. They dissed me

I'm shooting A's like a glock, tryna go home so I'm staring clock, a lot of  
game being ran so. I gotta keep watch

Flexing on my doubters, came a long way so you know I got some power

I read and write like it's my religion  
I'm not home because I need to learn to listen  
I meet my pen to my paper and put all my thoughts together

Homies ain't homies, can't ever send a single letter, but it's okay

Swerve them if they try and smile in my face  
No new friends they suspicious without a trace but I'm a make it and  
throw some degrees in they face  
Blow a kiss to the haters, help me shine so let me send them a love letter

*A rap by Spencer, age 16, scholar, LACOE CDF Freedom Schools site (Camp Scudder)*



# Overcoming challenges



**Korla Collins**

*Ella Baker Trainer, Lincoln Child Center CDF Freedom Schools site*

So much has changed since Korla Collins began her journey with *CDF Freedom Schools* almost 10 years ago – not only personal changes but also changes in the program and in those who it serves.

In 2007, her best friend was working at a *CDF Freedom Schools* site in Long Beach and asked Korla, who had just graduated with a bachelor's degree in dance, to help choreograph a routine for her middle school-age scholars. It was her first experience with *CDF Freedom Schools* and she loved it. So the

following summer she applied to be a Servant Leader Intern, traveled to Tennessee for national training and after that, she was hooked.

"In Tennessee, we saw this documentary about the Children's March and I wondered why I had never seen or heard of it," said Korla, who also has BA in Africana Studies. "I felt like (CDF) Freedom Schools was this party I wasn't invited to."

Now Korla is like the party planner, overseeing a site in Oakland and recently completing her five years as an Ella Baker Trainer. Ella Baker trainers assist in training local *CDF Freedom Schools* staff and are key in delivering key components every year at the training in Tennessee.

Between then and now, Korla has seen many changes.

"I remember when there was like 600 people at national training and we weren't big enough to fit in the Knoxville convention center. (This year) there were like 2,000." Korla has also seen changes in the scholars. When she first started, there were scholars with behavioral problems and issues that were more apparent. Many scholars today are not being raised by their parents and have experienced a lot of trauma.

"More youth are growing up in the system and have been exposed to more; so many are coming to (CDF) Freedom Schools with more needs," Korla said.

"These chants and songs are not just something they are singing," she said. "They are realizing they are truly something special. It's changing them. Their self-esteem is improving. They are becoming better students. They are retaining information better; some are even challenging their teachers to teach them better."

The books feature characters that have learning disabilities like autism, two moms or dads, or family members who have been incarcerated. Despite these challenges the characters face, the books show that challenges can be overcome.

And that is what *CDF Freedom Schools* is all about.

*"It's because of Freedom Schools that I became a teacher."*

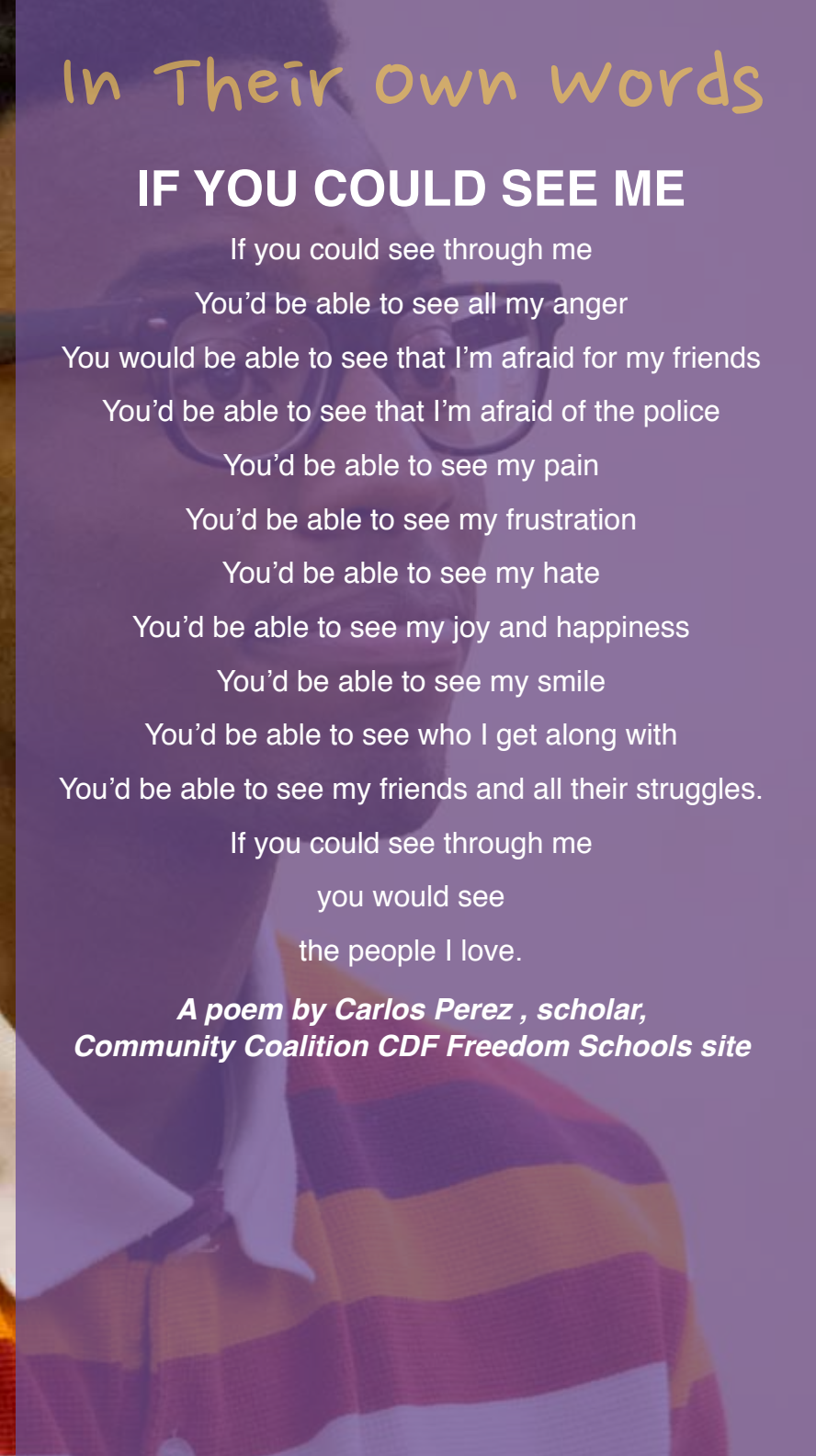
**- Vickie Olivares, site coordinator, Success in Challenges CDF Freedom Schools site**

## In Their Own Words

### IF YOU COULD SEE ME

If you could see through me  
You'd be able to see all my anger  
You would be able to see that I'm afraid for my friends  
You'd be able to see that I'm afraid of the police  
You'd be able to see my pain  
You'd be able to see my frustration  
You'd be able to see my hate  
You'd be able to see my joy and happiness  
You'd be able to see my smile  
You'd be able to see who I get along with  
You'd be able to see my friends and all their struggles.  
If you could see through me  
you would see  
the people I love.

***A poem by Carlos Perez, scholar,  
Community Coalition CDF Freedom Schools site***



## A New Life course



### LeMar Ruffin

Probation Officer, Los Angeles County Office of Education and LA County Probation Department CDF Freedom Schools site

Four years ago, LeMar Ruffin had never heard of Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program. But now, the CDF Freedom Schools concept has altered his life course; and implementing the program in juvenile justice facilities across the country is part of his mission.

Ruffin had been a probation officer for about six years when his supervisors told him about a new program they wanted to implement at Camp Afferbaugh. They wanted Ruffin to be one of the lead facilitators.

Although skeptical at first, Ruffin was open to all programs supporting youth. So in the summer of 2013, he flew to Tennessee to attend his first CDF Freedom Schools' national training. By the end of the nine-day training, Ruffin already knew that the program was going to be a success at the camp.

"On that last day I asked everyone to raise their glasses and said, 'I want to toast to a successful summer.' They thought I was crazy," he said, laughing. "But I already knew." And he was right. It was a successful summer and the program is still going strong. Ruffin is a large part of that success. His energy and charismatic personality really get youth excited.

"If I act like it is the coolest thing in the world, they are going to think it is the coolest thing in the world," he says. "But it's not an act."

On one afternoon, Ruffin led the participants of the CDF Freedom Schools program through a series of chants, raps and songs – some of which he wrote – that magnify positivity and strength. With his dark sunglasses and urban swag, the youth surround him like they would a rap star at a concert.

"He is truly amazing," said Jennifer Miller, principal at Camp Afferbaugh. "He takes the music of today and he writes his own lyrics and makes them relatable."

The songs, the affirmations, the books and the people are all a part of what makes this program work, especially for this population, Ruffin said.

"African American and Hispanic kids are graduating high school at a lesser rate. They are going to school and college but they are also filling up our prisons. I make sure our children are fully aware of this. This is not just a program; it's a way for us to save our culture to some extent."

Camp Afferbaugh holds about 60 youth, all of whom participate in the six-week CDF Freedom Schools summer program. Official say the crimes they have committed include rape, armed robbery, assault – everything but murder. Emotions are high, and the gang and racial tension at the camp is the worst it has been in a long time.

"But to see them all getting along in Harambe, speaks to power of this program," Ruffin said. That power is the reason why Ruffin hopes the program is expanded to juvenile facilities across the United States.

## A child Transformed



### Jessie Ryan

Parent, Focus on Family CDF Freedom Schools site

When Brooklyn Mataka was adopted at 3½ years old, she had a limited vocabulary. Her adoptive mother, Jessie Ryan, said it was clear that she had little to no exposure to books. Jessie immediately started reading and talking to Brooklyn regularly and by the time she hit kindergarten age, Brooklyn was using appropriate words to communicate. However, she was still lagging behind in her literacy development, so much that it was affecting her self-esteem.

"She didn't even have the confidence to try to read or write," Jessie said. That is when she learned about CDF Freedom Schools and the program at Phoenix Park in Sacramento. She fell in love with everything the program had to offer.

"I noticed a difference in Brooklyn almost immediately after starting Freedom Schools," her mother said. "By the end of the first week, she was walking with a bounce in her step, more confident, jumping out of bed in the morning excited to go learn."

After a couple weeks, Jessie saw her daughter transform. And by the end of the summer, Brooklyn had a little journal and was trying to write out sentences.

"And even if they weren't correct, she was trying and sounding out words which is a basic pillar to literacy," Jessie said. "Honestly, it was a bit emotional watching her grow so quickly."

Jessie and her husband, Arsenio, feel the academic improvements their daughter made in such a short period were nothing short of phenomenal but more importantly, the program exposed Brooklyn to characters that look like her, which is extremely important in their household in particular. Brooklyn is Jamaican and Puerto Rican; Jessie is White and her husband is Latino. Brooklyn also has a younger brother, Tristan, who is African American.

"In the book 'Imani's Moon,' Brooklyn was able to see an African girl who looked like her, who had a big dream and worked hard to reach her goals. It was an incredible message that she really internalized."

"It is this type of exposure that really helps develop a love of literacy," Jessie added

*"When I first heard the Freedom Schools motivational song I started crying. As I listened to the words I realized that I am strong no matter what I go through or what people say, I am going to make it."*

**-Spencer S., scholar, LACOE CDF Freedom Schools site (Camp Scudder)**



# Paying it Forward

## Juan Carlos Lugo

Project Director, Read Lead CDF Freedom Schools site



Many parents and students look up to Juan Carlos Lugo – well, actually, few people don't. The 6'10 college student, who has been a Servant Leader Intern and site coordinator at a CDF Freedom School site in Lynwood, towers over crowds. But it is not his height that people are drawn to; it is his unique ability to connect with the individuals who surround him.

"JC is why I am here," said 15-year-old Zerrick Davis. "JC made a big

difference in my life."

Zerrick was 13 when he started going to Freedom School. It was JC's first year as well. Zerrick was a quiet boy who kept to himself a lot. He rarely volunteered to participate and would often be seen with his head down.

He credits JC with helping him overcome his fears and "pumping me up to do things that I didn't want to do." Zerrick now volunteers at that same site trying to have a positive impact on someone else's life as JC had on his.

Being a mentor to kids, particularly at a summer camp focused on reading, is not what JC ever expected for himself. Growing up in Bell Gardens in Southeast Los Angeles, JC described himself as a quiet, reserved student whose best subjects were math and science.

As for English, he said, he hated the subject. In fact, JC ditched his sophomore English class so often that he had to retake it. "It was just something I struggled with," he said.

This insecurity with English started at an early age. With both of his parents from Mexico, JC's first language was Spanish. It wasn't until years later, when he realized his ability to communicate in both languages was not something to be ashamed of – it was an asset.

JC has come a long way from that timid, insecure kid who didn't know his worth and hated English. He received his Bachelor's degree in English Literature in 2013 and his experience with Freedom School has solidified his plans to become a high school English teacher and later, an administrator. JC is also the project director for Read Lead, who hosts five CDF Freedom School sites around Los Angeles.

*"Freedom Schools helps me stay positive. The positive vibes we get in Harambee and from the teachers keeps me going throughout the day. Whatever negative thoughts or feelings that I may have is pushed aside."*

- Toyrión S., age 17, scholar, LACOE CDF Freedom Schools site (Camp Scott)

# Smart, confident, Altruistic

## Virgil and Pshyra Grant

Parents, Success in Challenges CDF Freedom Schools site

For the past 12 years, CDF Freedom Schools has been an integral part of summer plans in the home of Virgil and Pshyra Grant.

All five of their daughters have gone through the program – two of which remain involved as junior Servant Leader Interns (SLI) at the Success in Challenges Long Beach site. And it has been great, Pshyra said.

Raising smart, confident, altruistic and God-centered children was their primary job. Part of that involved making sure that the girls knew about African American history. And although the couple made sure their children had access to books, museums and other activities that exposed them to Black culture and history, CDF Freedom Schools is an extraordinary supplement.

"They all loved it," she said. "They would come home singing the songs and would get upset if they would have to miss a day."

Their oldest daughter, Moya, who is now 23, was a scholar, a volunteer and then was a SLI for three years. After 10 years of actively participating in the program, Moya only stopped because she graduated from Georgia State University and she had to start her job. Twenty-two year old Ajah was active in the program through 2015, and Jordyn, 21, was also a fan although outside interests kept her from becoming an SLI. Time will tell how far 14-year-old Taj and Zamani, 13, will go in the program. Their first exposure was preschool age and they haven't gotten tired of it yet. In fact, they have become so used to the program and the people that it would be strange not to come every year, they said.

"I've been here a lot of years so now it's more like family," Zamani said.

It's like an annual family reunion – and every year the family keeps growing. As junior SLIs, Zamani and Taj are mentors to the younger scholars. So it is not an uncommon sight to see the young children run to the two sisters to ask them questions or simply give them hugs.

Pshyra loves that her girls have a place to go where they feel safe and connected. She also likes that CDF Freedom Schools continues to teach about black history and today's current events.

"I love when they come home and say, 'Mom, did you know ... ?'" Pshyra said. "They are having real-world conversations and talking about stuff that they may witness or experience. That's important."

*"One of the most important things this program offers, especially now, is a safe place for our youth."* - Loretta Johnson, executive director, First New Christian CDF Freedom Schools site





# A Model for Life

## Joy Masha

Executive Director, Read Lead CDF Freedom Schools sites



Ten years ago, I began my journey with Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program and, to say the least, it has made a profound difference in my life.

My first experience with the *CDF Freedom Schools* program was in 2006 at their annual Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute in Knoxville, TN. I had never seen anything like that before! To be amongst all those people of color, excited to make a difference, was mind-blowing. I felt liberated,

motivated and excited about my future. And I wanted to do everything in my power to make sure my scholars – the students I would work with that summer – felt the same way.

For 10 days, I was hypnotized by the energy, the phenomenal speakers and the intense sessions where we learned about the *CDF Freedom Schools* program way. We learned motivational songs, chants, and most importantly, how to deliver the program’s Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC). And if I had to say what is the most important thing that I got from the *CDF Freedom Schools* program it would definitely be the IRC.

Since that summer, I use the Integrated Reading Curriculum model in everything I do. Whether I am working with a student who is 5 years old or working with an individual who is 50 years old. The model works if you work the model.

I am honored to celebrate my 10-year anniversary with the *CDF Freedom Schools* program. In those 10 years, I have served at level – as a servant learning intern, a site coordinator, an Ella Baker trainer and now work as an executive director of an organization that operates *CDF Freedom Schools* sites in communities around Los Angeles. And it has not been easy.

CDF has high expectations for this program and my goal is to exceed them all. I am bringing a high quality program to my community. I want my community to be impacted by this program. Because of that expectation, you are working the entire year to make sure your six weeks go off flawlessly.

Although I am officially done as a trainer for the program, I will continue to work to bring more *CDF Freedom Schools* sites to communities across Southern California and make sure those programs are successful. Because I have seen first-hand what a difference this program makes in the lives of young people and the people who serve them.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE