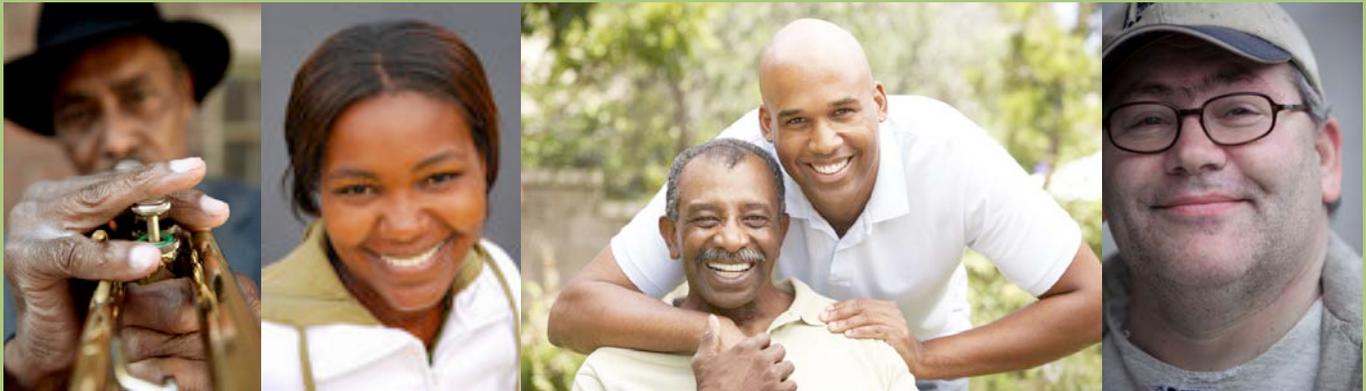


# I Am We Newsletter



June 2012 Volume 1

## Our **PURPOSE:**

To bring people, neighbors and resources together to **INSPIRE** and promote community excellence.

In the winter of 2009, my husband and I moved to the South Side of Chicago to be closer to our work, family and friends. When the spring approached, it seemed as our neighborhood had drastically changed. Crime and illicit behavior had plagued



our block. Within less than a year of residing in our new home, our building had become a target for burglars. Within a one month time period our building experienced several burglary attempts. Despite ADT, camera surveillance and sophisticated locks, the burglars were not deterred from breaking into our building. In the late spring of 2010, the burglars were successful. They broke into my upstairs neighbor unit and my unit as well. This terrified me, as I was five months pregnant at the time. At this point my husband and I knew we had two choices to make. 1.) Sell our condo and move! Or 2.) Create a solution to make our neighborhood safe. We chose #2, to make our neighborhood safe by developing relationships with our neighbors and becoming truly invested in the neighborhood we call home. My husband and I began attending our local CAPS meetings. There an officer gave a testimony of an ex-professional burglar who

said “I choose the communities I will burglarize by how people interact with one another. If I observe people not speaking or acknowledging one another, I know I have a week to clean up the block before anyone realizes they have ALL been burglarized. But if I go into a neighborhood and the neighbors are smiling and interacting with one another, I leave. In fact, the reason I got caught is because I went against my experience and tried to burglarize a home in a

community where neighbors knew and were checking in on one another.” This narrative is proof of the value of neighbors getting to know neighbors and the need to promote unity and



engagement. In addition to learning of the ex-burglar’s narrative, I also learned that many on my block had been burglarized within the same month I experienced my break-in, yet no one knew, because we were not engaging as a community.

\*Continue on page 2.

## Investing in one another.



I have lived in communities throughout Chicago, where many communities operated in excellence. When I think back to many of my old neighborhoods, I knew my neighbors name, I knew the neighbors across the street from me, and I also became familiar with police officers within my neighborhood. The communities that I lived in, the people worked together. The difference in my new community is that many do not. Why? Many reasons, but fear, isolation and the lack of INSPIRATION are the main culprits. I have spent my adult life in corporate America working for global corporations bottom lines. Now I am investing my skills, expertise and time to re-build communities throughout Chicago that is prone to violence - starting within my own community. But I can't do it alone, we need your help, your passion and your commitment...together, we can re-build many underserved communities - one block at a time.

Latisha Thomas, Founder and CEO

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### Who We Are

**I Am We** is a non-profit organization, comprised of professionals, educators, anthropologist and artist. Our primary goal is to *inspire*. We use visual and literary arts as a medium to create awareness, develop positive relationships, unify, and promote a passion for learning in underserved communities. When a community is inspired, neighbors become engaged, act, and become truly invested key contributors within their neighborhood. Therefore through inspiring others, we build nourishing communities from within via a true grass roots effort.

### What We Do

We inspire, educate, raise awareness and connect neighbors to neighbors and resources through community outreach and collaborative efforts.

### Our Goals

To inspire and transform underserved communities into cohesive peaceful and vibrant communities.

### Chicago's Unsung Heroes: The Launch Project.

In an effort to promote peace, unity and inspire, I Am We has released Chicago's Unsung Heroes as our launch project. Through this project we will highlight exceptional individuals, businesses and neighborhood committees who demonstrates community excellence.

Studies have shown that violence increases when there is a deficit of hope, economic strain, poor education, abandonment, and mental imbalance.

Therefore we are highlighting individuals who demonstrate excellence in:

- *Education*
- *Mentorship*
- *Social Economic Growth*
- *Health and Wellness*
- *Community Beautification.*

Upon selection, Chicago's Unsung Heroes will be part of a photography and audio exhibit that will highlight their stories and accomplishments throughout Chicago.

If you know of a person you would like to nominate as a Chicago Unsung Hero, [contact us](#) and tell us about your hero. We would love to hear from you.

# INSPIRING community excellence!

*Words from our founder, board and staff.*



## **Latisha Thomas, Founder and CEO**

Community Excellence will not happen overnight. It takes time, consistency, planning, commitment and a collaborative effort by all community stakeholders (residents, institutions, organizations, churches, etc.).

Considering the daily demand on many families and individuals, just thinking about rebuilding your community can be an overwhelming thought. Questions such as how, when and where to begin loom over most of our heads. However, did you know you can begin to rebuild your community by doing something as simple as acknowledging your neighbor with a smile, introducing yourself, helping your neighbor with their groceries, or helping your neighbors shovel the snow. These things sound small, but with consistency these small acts can begin to change the culture in your neighborhood and before you know it, you will begin to see your block operate in excellence. Inspiration - it starts with you!

## **Words from the board.**



Some think that neighborhoods have to be wealthy to operate in excellence, not so. Communities operate in excellence when all stakeholders come together and work towards common goals such as keeping their neighborhoods safe, beautifying their streets, and sharing resources and holding each other accountable; with consistency, this becomes the culture. Our goal is to inspire a change in the behavior of those stakeholders within a community who have become isolated. Isolation has been proven to be harmful for a community - and make many vulnerable to violence, poor health, scams and limited resources. As neighbors, we are not islands unto ourselves

because we live and interact with each other. How we value each other and how we interact together determines the type of community we create. The unsung heroes that we highlight realize that the first act of community come from a person or group who sees a need and becomes part of the solution. Their focus is on the doing. We have to do something to improve something. If we don't, we will simply complain, blame and stay stagnate. Everyone has a hope and a dream in their mind that may need a catalyst of encouragement and inspiration. That's why we tell the stories of the unsung heroes and are excited to launch this initiative as our first project.

**Our Staff.** As a new organization, our staff is the heart of our operation. Our staff and Executive Board has decades of experience in education, anthropology, business management, executive leadership and the arts. Though



no one is paid at this time, what keeps our staff motivated, is the belief that I Am We can change lives, foster safer neighborhoods, promote awareness, educate, unify and can stimulate behaviors that lead to community excellence. "Every time I discover a Chicago Unsung Hero, I ask myself, what more can I do to make my community safer and more vital? Now when I see people in my neighborhood I wonder if they too may be an unsung hero. That possibility has made me stop and introduce myself to my neighbors, many whom I have seen for years but never knew their names. Many resources needed for a vibrant community are right there within the neighborhood, sometimes just next door.

We as residents need to take off our blinders. Our communication with each other is the foundation of community, and in many neighborhoods, deters crime. " Sylvadia Fraction, Project Coordinator (left in photo).

## Our Chicago's Unsung Heroes



Since incorporating in October of 2011. We have been very busy listening to residents, committees and various organizations to understand their community needs; and equally important, identifying some of the solutions. What we are finding is a large, diverse population that is committed to making Chicago one of the safest and vibrant cities in the world.

Therefore, the purpose of this project is to inspire others to act and contribute to their communities, by sharing the stories of our featured **Chicago Unsung Heroes**, who are demonstrating community excellence.

### Alex LaVesque, owner of Hot Rods

*Car Restoration Service, specializing in the 1950-1970's era.*



Alex has a great business restoring cars, but what he's equally passionate about is restoring young men's souls through his mentoring group, *Hot Rods Curb Side Appeal*. Alex provides a free seven month hands-on training program, for people (mostly men) who live in communities prone to violence. After graduation, some of the mentees are prepared to enter a car restoration specialist career, while other's backgrounds prevent them from being employed. Therefore, Alex also teaches educational and life skills to prepare them for entrepreneurship in addition to employment. His mentees are a diverse population representing all ages and races. Alex adds that his program could not be successful without his peer mentors, who are just as passionate as Alex in

saving the lives of these young men. Alex's mentoring group is not a 501(c)(3) organization. He is operating his mentoring program from the revenue of his business. Each year, more and more men come through his program, and although this program is expensive to operate, Alex has not turned one person away.



### The Woodlawn Peace Project

The Woodlawn Peace Project is a committee (some shown in this photo) comprised of neighbors who decided to band together and take a stand against the violence that is destroying their community. They are rebranding their neighborhood by placing green ribbons on each tree on their blocks. The ribbon represent prayers of peace and safety. In addition, the committee has been proactive in bringing the community together through outreach, education and collaborative efforts. They recently acquired abandoned land that they will use to feed, educate and employ those within their community. This committee is growing, and is extremely committed to unifying their community through peace and

healthy relationship building between their neighbors and other community stake holders. Photo: Left, *Judith Hill, Maya Howdari, Charemi Jones, Karen Phillips and Elizabeth Gardner.*

# Saving Lives



From left: Paul Thomas (I Am We, Chair), Latisha Thomas (I Am We Founder, CEO), Erick Sermon, Rev. Lassiter (Acts of Faith), Pamela Murray (I Am We, Treasurer), and Jamen Brown (I Am We volunteer).

## Erick Sermon, Heart Disease PSA



In February 2012, I Am We had the opportunity to interview famed hip-hop star and heart disease awareness advocate, Erick Sermon.

Heart disease awareness has become very important to Erick, since in November 2011, he experienced a heart attack. In addition, he is outraged by the statistic, that heart disease is the number one cause of deaths among American adults. Heart disease kills more women than all forms of cancer combined. This is why Erick is using his celebrity to raise awareness on this issue in an effort to save lives. I Am We will be posting this public service announcement (PSA) on our website soon. We are very thankful to Erick for sharing his experience, and his commitment to heart disease awareness. In addition we are thankful to Dr. Simpson of Youth for

Positive Change and Rev. Lassiter, Acts of Faith for connecting us with Erick Sermon.

## Kahlil Nomno



Kahlil is the lead photographer for I Am We. He joins our mission to inspire and promote awareness in an effort to save lives and rebuild communities. I Am We is proud to have Kahlil as a key member to our team. Kahlil brings a wealth of experience to I Am We. Kahlil has an impressive resume; he is a Columbia Alumni, has worked for Harpo studios and on the set of many block buster films. Through our Chicago's Unsung Heroes project you will see the finesse and innovation of how he captures the soul of his subjects. Please stay tuned.

# Ways to get INVOLVED!

## Give



We are a non-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible and will help us inspire and promote community excellence in underserved communities.

Please give:

\$10.00 \_\_\_\_\_

\$25.00 \_\_\_\_\_

\$100.00 \_\_\_\_\_

\$ Other \_\_\_\_\_

\* Gifts of \$100.00 or more will be listed on our website as honorary investors.

## Volunteer



We want exceptional volunteers like you! We currently are in need of the following:

\*Writers, Editors, Photographers and Videographers

\*Community Historians

\*Marketing Advisors and Fund Raisers

\*Make Up Artist, Prop Professionals and Event Planners.

## Board Recruitment



We are expanding our board and we are looking for passionate and dedicated leaders who have a proven track record in:

\*Marketing

\*Operations

\*Legal

\* Education and Social Services.

Please *contact us to learn more.*

## TO LEARN MORE OR CONTACT US:

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We invite you to visit our website at:

[www.iamwecommunity.org](http://www.iamwecommunity.org)

