

Read what the Houston Chronicle wrote about Cherish Our Children Inc's GEMS program for middle school students experiencing parental incarceration.

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## Middle schoolers with incarcerated parents find a class and a family

By Amber Elliott STAFF WRITER



Photos by Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

Gaining Empowerment in Middle Schools manager Brandi Walker-Brown takes a photo as her students interact with Derek Dominique, an artist, producer and songwriter invited to speak to the class during the last session of the school year.

Educator Brandi Walker-Brown spent a lunch period walking down cafeteria aisles at Hoffman Middle School in Aldine Independent School District asking if anyone was interested in a class for kids with incarcerated parents. By the time the bell rang, 62 students had signed up. Meanwhile, over at Francis Scott Key Middle School in Houston ISD, counselors added another dozen or so names to Walker-Brown's list.

That was back in February, when Cherish Our Children Inc. first launched Gaining Empowerment in Middle Schools, a program designed to help preteens with incarcerated parents successfully transition from childhood to early adolescence.

“Middle school is one of the toughest times of a kid’s life,” says Walker-Brown, Gaining Empowerment program manager. “Everyone is focused on the babies, making sure they get off to a great start. In high school, they’re active in sports or choir. But in middle school, sometimes those babies are forgotten.”



*Key Middle School students ask Dominique questions during a video call.*



*Walker-Brown hands out certificates of completion to students during the last day of Gaining Empowerment classes.*

Ken Wells, Cherish Our Children president and CEO, hired Walker-Brown because she knows those challenges better than most. Walker-Brown grew up in Kashmere Gardens near Key Middle School, and her father was incarcerated for much of her youth.

“She lived the life that these kids are living,” he says. “It’s beyond empathy. She understands how to reach these kids when they are very hard to reach.”

On June 8, Walker-Brown held a combined “graduation” ceremony for Gaining Empowerment students from both schools. She gave ribbon-tied diplomas to the eighth graders; all 24 kids received certificates of participation, too.

Partly due to coronavirus related restrictions, the final number of children approved for the class was whittled down to two dozen. But Wells notes that this is a very fluid population. “There’s a lot of uncertainty in these kids’ lives,” he says. “They may wind up going to live with a grandparent. It’s a very insecure life for a lot of them, they tend to move around a lot.”

Which is why Walker-Brown tried to make the inaugural graduation extra special. She invited Derek Dominique, an 11-time Grammy Award nominee who has collaborated with Bun B and Slim Thug, as a surprise guest.

"He's shared some of their same experiences and piggybacked off what we talked about the whole year," Walker-Brown says. "You don't have to be a product of your environment. You can literally be anything you want to be."

When her own father served time, Walker-Brown says she questioned if anyone would be there when she got home from school. Or whether she would have any food to eat.

After starting out as an educator, she became a wraparound specialist for HISD to help other families find solutions during tough times. Wells describes the position as a utility player or connector of sorts — someone who identifies if a child's family is about to be evicted and if they need to be match with an organization that can help with rent. The philosophy being, if a student is worried about fulfilling material needs like clothing, shelter or food, it's very difficult for them to learn.

"We want their attendance to improve, grades to go up and be involved in fewer disciplinary actions," Wells says of the warning signs that something's amiss at home. "Because of the trauma and stigma and shame a lot of them have experienced, they're at risk of not developing cognitively."

Wells and Walker-Brown developed the curriculum while most of HISD students were operating under remote-learning guidelines.

"We identified a number of cognitive skills that kids this age need to be developing, like impulse control, decision-making, goal-setting, emotion regulation and thinking about what they're going to say before they get angry with someone," Wells says. "For a lot of these kids, they don't have any control over their lives. They're told what to do, and in many cases, people don't respect their opinion. They've learned helplessness, so we give them bite-sized control over their lives."

Once classes resumed in person, Walker-Brown tacked butcher paper up on the walls. She asked students to write down their expectations and rules for the class. It gave them a sense of control.

Another time, she held her cellphone over her forehead with a word flashing across the screen. Students acted out whatever the prompt was.

"I heard one say, 'I get angry with my father because he's gotten so many chances and he keeps letting us down and winding up in prison,' " Wells recalls.

That level of openness is Walker-Brown's goal. She assures her students that the Gaining Empowerment in Middle Schools program is like Las Vegas. "I tell them, 'What happens in GEMS, stays in GEMS.' So they know this is a safe space."

Mackenzie, 14, says that she was quiet and didn't have a lot of friends before she joined the class. Her father was incarcerated, though she tried not to think about that too much. Instead, she'd write down her feelings or listen to music, but that can get lonely, she says.

One day, Walker-Brown asked Mackenzie and her classmates to throw soft balls, representing emotions, at her. The lesson was, if you bottle them up, "It will hit you all at once and it'll hit you hard."

Mackenzie took that to heart. "GEMS helped me cope with it, more than I was doing myself," says the eighth-grade graduate. "It made it better to know that I'm not alone. (Walker-Brown) was a big help with learning to communicate and express myself. She made us feel extremely accepted and never made any of us feel left out."

Mackenzie says that the class feels like a family. Everyone feels at home, and on graduation day, they congratulated each other.

It's the feedback that Wells and Walker-Brown had hoped for, which is why they're aiming to expand the program's reach. On June 16, Cherish Our Children will host a dinner event at B&B Butchers, underwritten by board member and restaurant owner Benjamin Berg, with a fundraising goal of \$100,000. That's enough to launch a summer school program, hire another manager and separate sixth, seventh and eighth graders into separate classes, Wells says.

And help ensure that they never have to turn another student away.

"Growing up, if I had had this type of program, I would have benefited so much," Walker-Brown says. "Because when you know better, you do better. We're giving them different outlets." [amber.elliott@chron.com](mailto:amber.elliott@chron.com)