

Barnabus Shakur: Regenerating Bed-Stuy, One Young Person at a Time
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Regenerating Bed-Stuy, One Young Person at a Time

By Linda Chavers

I can help them by giving them what I had.

Growing up on Bainbridge Street in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant and attending William E. Grady High School, Barnabass Shakur spent his extra time in after-school youth programs such as Project Reach Youth, Youth Speaks and the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship while most of his peers spent it on the streets with local gangs. "My mother forced me into after-school programs," says Shakur about his free time as a youth. His mother's efforts proved fateful when Shakur's close childhood friend, "Late", who was with the notorious Bloods, was arrested and sentenced to a twenty-five-to-life sentence in a maximum security prison at the age of nineteen. His fate was the turning point for Shakur. He noticed that the most vulnerable time for youth was after school let out. His experience with NFTE would prove fruitful when he started to think about what would pose as an attractive alternative for youth who have more free time than most adults would probably like. But he didn't want to be condescending or punitive. He knew the attitudes and experiences of most urban youth firsthand and wanted to always first and foremost meet vulnerable kids on the same level. So at the young age of twenty-one, Shakur founded Bed-Stuy's Project Regeneration, Inc. to attract, group and grow Brooklyn's youth into a "strengthened and empowered family structure in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn" as PR-G's Web site, www.pr-g.org, states.

In a way, PR-G has become a positive spin on the usual gang lifestyle that attracts many male youth of color in Brooklyn's poorer neighborhoods. Spending a sunny afternoon in PR-G's offices, one of Shakur's "kids", Andre C., showed this reporter his "tags" of achievement - metal army-like dog tags around his neck. The first, "ROP New York, Andre C., First Class 2003, 12" stated Andre's program and graduation date. The second tag represented "things that are most important to us, what we value: family, leader, warrior, virtue, patience, pride and community," nineteen-year-old Andre C., aka "Spectacular", proudly explained.

I basically took anything I could remember from my life that benefited me and attempted to put it into a program.

Shakur noticed how his own life interests spawned, and shaped them into ROP, "I didn't like school, but I liked workshops. They're more hands-on, more relevant to life, from financial literacy, goal-setting, police confrontation, etc." ROP, or Rites of Passage, is the fruition of Shakur's efforts and the core of PR-G. Shakur and his small staff (which consists of a handful of his friends, peers and current kids in the program) foster workshops with real professionals in whatever fields the students have interest in. Not only do the kids meet and work with professionals, but they also create and enact community projects, most notably community cleanup. "Whatever community project they want to do, they do. We make sure it goes in the way they want it to go. I came up with ROP and that was the organization itself when I started [PR-G]," explains Shakur. Thus, while Shakur is the director of PR-G, while it has been his personal background and desires that's shaped PR-G, it's the kids that give it its direction. Shakur believes its that trust and guided independence that's kept the

kids coming and succeeding in the program.

...What's the purpose of a big family barbecue? It's to bring pride to the community. Don't worry about paying for food, foods on us, games on us.

Community Pride Day started out as just another community project the kids came up with. "They have to do a community event and they said 'let's clean up the community' and then it was like, 'who wants to clean up the community?' so we decided to do a scavenger hunt. And then stuff just came out like having food and a DJ," says Shakur. The first Community

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Pride Day was five years ago with a humble outcome of neighborhood folks. This year on June 11th, PR-G expects about a thousand people for the all-day event. Shakur's enthusiasm is evident, "We have games, children's games, games for the teens. Bring a blanket, we'll provide a picnic. We're having live performances such as Lady Jane. I'm working on getting some others such as Papoose, I'd love to get Mos Def to come down here."

Besides ROP and Foot Soldiers, PR-G's community service project where kids have an assigned cleanup area in Bed-Stuy, Shakur also implemented an activity for adults humorously called, "Peanut Butter & Jelly." Inspired by a friend who invited twenty random people for a get-together at her house, Shakur and his friend and colleague, Ted P., decided to include similar scenes in PR-G for the adult participants. "It's an alternative night, just to relax, chill and be with beautiful, smart, strong people." PB & J's are on the TK of every month.

Of course, Shakur's young age coupled with his successful entrepreneurship has gained the attention and support of

many companies such as Fleet Bank, Deutsche Bank, Microsoft, NFTE and the New York Foundation. PR-G's past awards include the Oppenheimer Fund's National Social Entrepreneur of the Year (2005) and the Citizen's Committee and Fleet Bank's Youth Entrepreneur of the Year Award (2003).

We look for spirit. I don't care what circumstances you're in, it's just your spirit. We don't go after kids because they're smart or because they're stupid. We don't go after them because they're good or because

they're bad. You could be an A student, and you could be a dropout, you just have to have a spirit and a drive.

Spirit and drive are just what PR-G kids exude when this reporter met with a few of them. "I feel like a better person," says Chris Gordon with a genuine warm smile on his face. Gordon, aka Chris "Kalangi", was born in Trinidad and currently lives in Crown Heights; he's been with PR-G since its start four years ago. How he got involved with PR-G testifies to Shakur's sentiment that recruitment and retaining is all through word-of-mouth, through "family." "I was involved with [Shakur's] sister and the only way I could stay that way was if I was in the program. I'm no longer with the sister but I'm still with the program." Last year, Gordon dropped out of Sheepshead Bay High School and his mother pleaded with Shakur to talk to him. One night over dinner,



Foot Soldiers surround Teddy P. (holding broom handle) and Barnabas Shakur.

Shakur casually discussed with Gordon what his goals were and his dropping out came up. Shakur told Gordon he could work at PR-G while he prepared for his GED. At the time of this reporter's meeting, Gordon came to the office bearing good news, he'd passed. "I love [PR-G] to death, from the beginning. I dedicate myself to it, we all dedicate ourselves to it. I just want to see it grow and shine as much as it

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should.”

Kamalia Herman, a soft-voiced, demure seventeen year-old who graduated early from Sheepshead Bay High is not only one of the “kids” but staff as well, serving as PR-G’s office manager. “[Shakur’s] sister is my best friend so that’s how I got involved,” laughs Herman, “I’m part of the ROP program. I want to find myself.”

It’s Andre C., who plans to attend Temple University in the fall, that best portrays what PR-G is doing for Bed-Stuy’s youth - empowering them in a more three-dimensional manner, empowering them for the real world. “...[PR-G] has me reading

a lot more. A lot of people where we come from don’t read as much but the books that [PR-G] suggest that we read are interesting. It helps with, like, with life, like Rich Dad, Poor Dad, great book, it teaches you about financial literacy. School doesn’t really provide you with how to manage your money but it’s teaching you how to get a job and work for money, [but it] doesn’t teach you how to make money work for you and here that’s what I’m learning and not just from the books.”

This kind of thought process is rare to hear from most youth anywhere, and to have it occurring amongst our own is just what Barnabass Shakur’s Project Regeneration is all about.

For more details on the activities, business plans and donation information, go to www.pr-g.org.