

Launching of the CHILD RIGHTS ALLIANCE



Ms. Bonita Harris, Childhood Specialist, delivering the feature address.

ChildLinK in collaboration with several local partners particularly the Rights of the Child Commission (RCC) launched the Child Rights Alliance (CRA) on Wednesday February 8th 2017. The objective of the CRA is to strengthen national and regional collaboration through improved networking, advocacy and lobbying for the protection of children from violence and abuse. The feature address came from Early Childhood Specialist Bonita Harris.

Feature Address

I did try to get this 'feature address' changed into 'closing remarks' but I was overruled by the organizers. So please bear with me, while I do some serious 'addressing.'

While preparing, I was struck by Venus Lalloo's story in last week's *Stabroek News*. She left her mother's home at age 13 and soon after found herself pregnant. Twenty-five years later, she had given birth to 13 children. And then I read in yesterday's *Kaieteur News* that the 'close knit community of Bushlot Farm, Berbice was thrown into a state of shock after a man chopped his ex-wife and her new partner' and then killed himself by drinking poison. The *Stabroek News* that same day reported that Narine had been married four times 'and had been abusive to almost all of four wives' and that one of his 'ex-wives had committed suicide.'

I asked myself why the 'close knit community' was thrown into state of shock. Did this tight community not know what was going on in these families -- the family into which Narine Permauloo was born and grew up and the four families where he became husband and father?

It is not just that Venus and Narine were denied their right to grow up in a safe family and a community that had the necessary resources to protect them -- with awful consequences for their families and their communities. (Note two ways of using the word 'just')

Perhaps we need to stop talking about 'raising children' and start talking about raising adults, raising families, raising communities. Talk about 'building communities' is actually a good start if we are contemplating more than physical infrastructure development.

Think of the men involved in what we have come to know as the Bartica and Lusignan massacres. Did they grow up in families and communities where the adults supervising their young and formative lives had the awareness, knowledge, and skills to ensure the holistic development of boy children? When boys do not get the attention, respect, and support they need from their families, they turn to peer groups – gangs, we call them.

When a society produces human beings who become capable of murder, rape, and various forms of violent behaviour towards themselves, loved ones, and others – we need to ‘address’ the source of the problem. The source of the high levels of violence in our society can be found in the environment which currently nurtures our children.

When children are raised *in* a society which values and promotes violence as a problem-solving tool, what should we expect of them when they become adults?

When children are raised *by* a society in which adults tolerate, excuse, equivocate, justify, and even recommend hitting children in homes and schools, what should we expect of these children when they become adults?

Anti-bullying campaigns in our schools that do not *first* address the bullying behaviours of parents, teachers, police and other big people are doomed to failure.

When children are ‘cared for’ and ‘taught’ and ‘housed’ by adults who disrespect them and their rights, what makes us think they will become self-respecting and other-respecting adults?

When boys are raised by abusive mothers, fathers, and older siblings ... why are we surprised when they become abusers when they get ‘big’?

When girls grow up getting licks and seeing their mothers getting licks, why are we surprised when they get involved in abusive relations and find it difficult to leave? We teach our girls to take licks.

Let us do a quick survey. Please stand if you were never hit, shouted at, cursed, disrespected, or humiliated by someone bigger at home or school. Look around the room. You see, ‘licks is life’ for children in our country!

This is what the Child Rights Alliance vision, mission, and goals are attempting to ‘address.’

It was not raining when Noah built the ark. I am sure there were arguments, disagreements, and contentiousness while he and his family were cooped up trying to save humanity and the creatures essential for humanity’s well being. But they held on. They did not give up.

There is a lesson for us in this story.

The violence currently raining down, flooding, and overwhelming us calls for the vision of the Child Rights Alliance for “a Guyanese Society where every child has the right to grow up in a safe family and community” to become the vision of each and every one of us – individuals *and* institutions. The work of safeguarding our children entails is more than any Noah can handle.

This is why the Child Rights Alliance mission seeks to “ensure the protection and holistic development of children ... *through building partnerships with all stakeholders.*”

The Child Rights Alliance mission requires that *all* partners and *all* stakeholders – government, non-government, community-based, faith-based, and security bodies -- resolutely focus on a common vision, be respectful in engaging with one another, accept feedback without becoming defensive or withdrawing, and work without ceasing to become more and more accountable. Individuals and organizations have to model the behaviours we expect of one another *and* that our children should expect of us.

The strategic plan for 2017 to 2021 presented today by the Child Rights Alliance was decided on by representatives of the stakeholder groups who first took on Guyana’s ark-building challenge. But even those not yet on board and who

did not participate in the initial shaping process should find what we have come up with, accommodating and a sufficient start. We can adjust as necessary. They are not commandments and nothing is written in stone.

Let us review the first goal: Like many parents not equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources to do right by their responsibilities towards children, many who have a stake in a better future for our families, communities, and country have critical needs. This was the thinking behind the first Child Rights Alliance goal and the capacity-building activities designed to meet the goal of 'empowering partners to create an enabling environment for the holistic development of children.'

The second and third goals specifically focus on safeguarding children against violations of their rights and promoting respect for their rights and the UN convention our country agreed to.

What we do and don't do about the circumstances in which the least and most vulnerable among us, our children, defines us as a community. Just as those who colonized, enslaved, indentured, and refused to recognize the human rights of our foreparents ... our children are seeing their human rights being routinely violated by those who have a duty to safeguard their rights from violation. Our children can expect to be ridiculed or worse if they attempt to assert their rights. This is not right and must stop. Until adults meet *their* responsibilities, we cannot lecture children on their responsibilities.

The fourth Child Rights Alliance goal we decided on was "to advocate for the development and implementation of national policies, legislation and programmes, in keeping with international best practice, so that every child in Guyana is able to reach his or her full potential." We not only have to ensure the best possible life for our children, today, while they are in their formative years to ensure that they are healthily and fully formed, not deformed; but we must also consciously enable our children to reach their full potential.

I want to get personal here. On January 30 this year, I became 70 years old. Last January around this time, my father for whom I was caring, died at 95 years. A few years ago, I buried my mother who lived almost 89 years. So I have been thinking a lot about how I was parented, the parenting they had, and the family and community which produced me.

My father's mother was a full-time housewife (she took in sewing to help out) and his father was a butcher; they had 13 children ... my father was the third child of the lot. My grandfather had no father that he was aware of, he was brought up by two 'spinsters' as they were called then, named Bone.

From what my mother told me about her grandmother, with whom she and her unwed mother lived, she spent a lot of time in her rocking chair and visiting the sick. One leg had to be amputated because of diabetes. She, my mother's grandmother, had ten children. I can't recall what that grandfather did; he didn't seem to be much in the picture.

The men in my mother's life were her seven uncles. My maternal grandmother, as the youngest of her siblings, spent her days cooking and cleaning for the whole family. Up to age nine, my mother never saw the inside of a school. She recalls a truant officer visiting their home in New Amsterdam and she was told to hide under the bed while her grandmother entertained and distracted him. She recalls listening to the conversation from under the bed and 'wondering about the ways of grown-ups.'

Neither parent went to secondary school because although they were what was called 'bright' their parents could not afford it. Both worked as 'pupil teachers' when only 15 years old.

Yet, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, while parents of six children and teachers at Belair Lutheran, now Belair Primary, they somehow gained acceptance at the University of Chicago where my father graduated with a PhD in Comparative Education and my mother with a Master's degree in Education Testing & Measurement. We, the children, were farmed out to various relatives and friends for foster-parenting while our parents were abroad.

How is it in the middle of the last century in Berbice, Guyana, a boy child born in 1921 and a girl child born in 1920 were able to reach what can be described as 'their full potential' and raise, and educate, children born between 1947 and 1952 to achieve *their* potential? They were not rich; they did not win government scholarships; they did not know people in high places. There were no agencies or special services to ensure the well being of children or protect their rights.

I think families and communities were safer places then. Not totally safe, of course, but safer. Our families and communities provided an environment which ensured "our protection and holistic development."

My mother, because she was never hit by her mother or grandmother (who paid a visit to address the headmaster who hit her granddaughter; he never did it again) and saw firsthand how children were brutalized by teachers, kept us safe. We were none of us brilliant students, but we were happy children who did 'okay' in school. My father, a functioning alcoholic, who would get what was then called 'sweet' (I was then not aware that violence was often associated with alcohol consumption) did wield a cane at school where he was the headmaster. But our mother's presence at the same school and at home, protected us – as did my father's love of books. He spent much of his free time reading, and even with his small teacher's salary, always bought books.

Although I did not suffer beating, bullying, screaming, or cursing at home or at school; fear of my father in his headmaster role prevented me from learning even basic math. Seeing him continually at odds with my younger brother was directly responsible for making me a parent educator unequivocally opposed to corporal punishment, and especially punishment meted out in the name of love and discipline.

As a teacher, parent, and aunt – I have never hit a child, but all the adults who as children passed through my hands, and adults I have since worked with, will attest to the fact that I am serious, strict, and very intolerant of slackness and undisciplined behaviours. And I raised a lovely son who is now a lovely man, a good husband, and great father of two girls.

This is for 'the better-for-having-been-beaten' brigade of the corporal punishment army!

Now, to return to the 'full potential' of every child *element* of the fourth goal of the Child Rights Alliance ... We recognise that Guyana already has national policies, legislation, programmes and "international best practice" models to achieve this end. But these must be developed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. We have to advocate *and* walk the talk. And we must develop and implement our own models for replication throughout all ten regions of Guyana.

Strategizing, planning, and now finally launching the Child Rights Alliance, has not been smooth sailing. Hopefully, the difficulties we experienced so far have been necessary to equip us for the real work ahead: that of building, maintaining, and sustaining a mature and effective child protection system.

While we envisage that a strengthened Rights of the Child Commission, in collaboration with partners and stakeholders, will play a leading role in this rights-based project, all are called to display leadership that inspires our children, our communities, and our country, now and in the future.

I want to end with a quotation on what 'inspirational leadership' looks like. It comes out of the response to HIV/AIDS in the book *On Watch: Views from the Lighthouse* by Christopher Spence]

Inspirational leadership offers a steady focus on the reality of the challenge to be faced.

It develops sensible policies designed with everyone's best interests in mind.

It insists on engaging everyone's thinking on every issue, on championing the leadership of others, on the empowerment of each person, and on the strength of the resources to hand.

Inspirational leadership points the way ahead, while pacing in step with others and knowing what's possible when. Without abdicating responsibility for taking decisions, this kind of leadership works through consultation for consent, even when complete agreement cannot be reached on the best way forward. People who lead in this way assume full accountability, within and beyond their immediate constituency.

Inspirational leadership ... means giving up our fear, identifying our particular sphere of influence, and coming forward to offer leadership in our own distinctive way.

It will mean making sure that our leadership is never competitive or isolated, but nurtured and expanded by the most intelligent support every step of the way.

It will mean relaxing enough to feel the beat of nature's pulse, to spot and tend the shoots of organic growth sprouting all round us.

And most important, it will mean daring to infuse our leadership, not with vanity, the addictive need for control, but with the inspiration we draw from staying in touch with our hopes and dreams, with our most cherished vision for the world.

With our feet on the ground, we must remember to look up to the stars.

Here is your other homework. Go home and hug your children. Send phone or text hugs if they are not with you.

Blessings, and One Love,

Bonita Harris, February 8, 2017, Public Free Library, Georgetown, Guyana