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It's time
to change the
conversation.

DC
Campaign
to Prevent
Teen Pregnancy®

www.DCCampaign.org

Colbert I. King

A Tragedy That Is Ours to Stop

"It starts with teaching our daughters to never allow images on television to tell them what they are worth, and teaching our sons to treat women with respect, and to realize that responsibility does not end at conception, that what makes them men is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one."

— Sen. Barack Obama, speaking to the 99th annual NAACP convention July 14 in Cincinnati.

Let's apply that message to the District of Columbia, where some of our daughters never learn what they are really worth, where some of our sons aren't taught to treat women with respect, and where too many sons and daughters know how to make babies but not how to raise them.

Consider what that has wrought.

It shows up in youth violence, in child abuse and neglect, in school dropout rates, and in a steady stream of young men into the juvenile detention center at Oak Hill and the D.C. jail.

A major cause of all this? Teen pregnancy. That, at least, is the thesis of Brenda Rhodes Miller, executive director of the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. She makes a case that only the ignorant would ignore.

"We used to say that boys get guns and girls get babies. Now, we routinely ask reporters for

the age of parents whenever someone meets a tragic end," Miller wrote in an e-mail this week.

Her point? D.C. neighborhoods plagued by youth violence are the same neighborhoods where birth rates among teenagers are highest. To see for yourself, go to the campaign's Web site: www.dccampaign.org/content/view/144/106/. Look at the 2005 and 2006 maps of juvenile arrests and teen births.

Oak Hill and the city jail? Consider the youths in the juvenile justice system. Many are sons who were born to teenage mothers. Miller's organization points out that these youths are three times as likely as other boys to end up in the justice system.

Many also are teenage fathers.

An old story worth repeating: A few years ago, I met with a group of young inmates at the D.C. correctional treatment facility.

One inmate told me he was the father of three children, each 6 years old. The children weren't triplets, however. Six years earlier, when he was 16, the inmate had gotten three girls pregnant. "They were born one month apart," he said sheepishly.

School failures? Miller says about 70 percent of teenage mothers don't graduate from high school, leaving them with few resources to prepare their own children for school. "Plus, they can't get a living-wage job," she said.

Child abuse and neglect? The children of

teenagers are twice as likely to be abused and neglected and more likely to wind up in foster care, Miller said.

Or worse, I might add.

This week, we learned about the death of a District infant, just 5 months old, and the possibility that he died when his sleeping mother rolled over on him. His mother is 15.

A few more statistics to fill in the picture: Children of adolescent mothers, research shows, are more likely to have learning disabilities and more likely to be unprepared for school, and to have vocabulary and attention deficits. Sadly, too, children of teenage parents are more likely to become teenage parents themselves.

And so the intergenerational cycle of dysfunction goes on. And the community's foundation weakens further. All before our eyes.

Does it have to go on this way? Miller says no, and I agree.

But, as Obama told his Cincinnati audience, "We all have to do our part."

We start by recognizing that most of the youths engaged in risky and destructive behavior don't have what they need: homes where they are given a sense of belonging, where they are made to feel safe from an early age. They have gangs instead of families, the streets instead of schools.

D.C. Council member Jim Graham told me

recently that the Citywide Coordinating Council on Youth Violence Prevention is tracing and monitoring 47 gangs or crews throughout the city.

We must fill the void.

Enter the world of young girls and boys who need, but lack, supportive, one-on-one relationships with adults. Encourage intervention by faith-based organizations to help youths get away from the behavior that dooms their future. Change starts with a civic community that doesn't make excuses but holds young men and women — and parents — accountable for their behavior.

The D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has done more than its part, and with some success. The city, says Graham, is directing human and physical resources at the gang program.

Demand more responsibility from the D.C. government? Yes, but, as Obama contends, we must demand more responsibility from ourselves.

No amount of support from the city will make any difference if we, as a community, don't seize more responsibility in our own lives and with our children.

Obama said it. Brenda Rhodes Miller says it. I say it, too.

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