

QUEENS

for more than a day

The Queens are reshaping the lives of young women in Barbados, through positive mentorship, and workshops - and hope to establish a live-in home for teenage girls

By Heather Barker

An extraordinary gift for being a sounding board for teen girls she'd meet randomly inspired Donna Clarke to reach out and set up a charity in 2001 to help young women.

Clarke, a mother herself, nurses an overwhelming concern for young women and would often be praying for them. "I was almost amazed to hear how much these girls would reveal to me. I'd meet a teen on the van, or sit down somewhere and encounter a girl, and they'd just tell me about themselves," she explained.

The Queens started with 10 girls meeting every Saturday in the Goddard's Training Room. And outside of those fleeting hours, Clarke, drawing on resources from other women who wanted to help, would assist those girls who needed practical day-to-day resources. The Queens' vision is simple and singular in

focus - "to aid in the development and nurturing of young women, empowering them to be meaningful members of the community." Clarke, director of the charity, pursues this vision on a voluntary full-time basis with Joy Gibson, who's in charge of business and administration. They operate out of Clarke's home in Clermont, St. Michael.

The cool office is flushed with a soothing lilac, the colour The Queens has adopted for its logo, and exhibits bursts of floral decorations and exquisite perfume branding. A large poster with the crown that forms part of The Queens

logo stands royally against a wall. And in a car seat, the latest addition to the Clarke family, a little princess, Naarah, 3 months old, rests quietly as three women discuss the challenges and joys facing girls and teenagers in Barbados.

MENTORING AND ENCOURAGING HUNDREDS

Approaching eight years of age and surviving on support from a handful of companies - including Goddard's Enterprises, the Travel House, and Century Elson, as well as personal donations - The Queens has mentored and



Donna Clarke addressing a training session at COB



*A Queens Workshop at the home
of Rob and Mary Cottrell*

encouraged many girls, and is still looking forward to doing more. A lot more.

So who does The Queens cater to? The charity primarily seeks to develop the self-esteem of its members, mainly 15 and 16 year-old girls, by helping them to realize they have a God-given purpose, and assisting and encouraging them to pursue their potential. "The Queens is about setting standards and raising the bar. The girls are not here merely to exist; they have a specific purpose. We tell the girls about

Jesus Christ and his transforming love; that's how you build healthy self-esteem. We let them know they are born to do something special on earth. And out of this they can make healthy choices - not abusing their body sexually, for example," Clarke explained. And if there are girls who need practical assistance with things as simple as

buying deodorants or preparing for a job interview, the charity provides that also.



"THE QUEENS ARE GOD-SENT"

One Queen is Shan-nae Reece, 20, a business owner and student at the University of the West Indies. She got involved as a 14 year-old girl at the Springer Memorial School. "Donna came to speak to us and I became interested in the group especially since I'm the type of person who likes to help," Reece remembers.

"Donna was like a cool big sister or

mother. She was always quoting the Book of Esther and telling us we were queens. She boosted my self esteem and was like a confidante to me. She was not hard to approach because she would put herself in our shoes and give us options without being pushy."

Reece also recalls what her own personality was like when she joined The Queens. "I was kind of judgmental but The Queens helped me to get rid of that through my learning to deal with a lot of

d i f f e r e n t personalities. And that's helped me a lot."

Reece, who runs a hair salon, was active in The Queens until she was 17, but still meets with the group occasionally to assist. "If not for The Queens in my life I probably wouldn't be at UWI today. There are not many women who spend time giving their all

to other women. The Queens are God-sent."

RESPONSIBILITY AS BARBADIANS

The Queens offers workshops that focus on topics as diverse as identity, beauty, social graces, and conflict resolution. Then there's the mentorship aspect and careers advice, as well as the more practical assistance given where necessary. Up until last year, workshops were offered across a few secondary schools during term time, but because of demand the Saturday

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THE VISION OF THE QUEENS

"OUR GOAL IS TO AID IN BUILDING STRONG CHARACTER IN WOMEN THROUGH MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES, WORKSHOPS, AS WELL AS TO ESTABLISH A HOME FOR TEENAGE GIRLS. "

This charitable organization exists to aid in the development and nurturing of young women, empowering them to be meaningful members of the community.

THE MAIN OBJECTIVES ARE TO:

- promote greater understanding of themselves as young women
- encourage personal focus, discipline, and diligence
- teach healthy lifestyle choices
- set and reach realistic life goals
- assist young women to work through past issues
- build healthy self-esteem and confidence
- develop skills to deal with anger, rejection, frustration etc.
- teach young women to overcome self defeat and destructive thoughts
- aid in the achievement of advancing their education
- offer scholarships for educational achievement

THE SECONDARY OBJECTIVES ARE TO PROVIDE:

- charitable services for pre-teen girls, teenage girls and teenage mothers (food, clothes etc.)
- short-term living arrangements for teenage girls while equipping them to overcome obstacles that might hinder them from becoming a positive member of their community

WHAT THE CHARITY CURRENTLY DOES:

- The charity started in 2001 with ten girls from various schools, using the Goddard's Conference Room as their main meeting place.
- Three separate Saturday programmes have been completed, catering to over sixty girls - each programme covers thirteen workshop sessions.
- Provides monthly food supplies to approximately thirty families.
- Offers mentorship and emotional support to the girls in the programme and their families.
- The mentorship programme within the schools officially began January 2007. It consists of twenty one workshops such as 'Social Graces', 'Dining Etiquette', 'Beauty', 'Business Etiquette', etc.
- Preparatory activities towards the programme for teenage mothers commenced in January 2008.

For more information on The Queens or to find out how you can assist, in whatever way, e-mail TheQueensCharity@gmail.com or contact Donna Clarke at 233-4579 or Joy Gibson at 233-5497.

sessions resumed in January 2009 where girls from different schools join together. The workshops, held two Saturdays each month, will run until August 2009. "At the workshops we also seek to deal with the girls' needs where a volunteer would be assigned to five girls to identify and help meet their specific needs," Clarke said.

"This is our responsibility as Barbadians. You can't see issues in society and say someone else will fix them. This one is for us to fix," Clarke stated emphatically.

And to fulfil their vision, the charity needs more women and families to come on board. "We need families who will

invite the girls to their homes for the day, so the girls can see and share in a healthy home environment," she says, her solicitousness palpable.

COMMON CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG WOMEN

What does Clarke think are the most common challenges facing young women in Barbados? "The one thing that really troubles me is perception of self. It's not healthy and that's widespread. It really concerns me because out of that comes everything else."

The affirmation exercises that the girls do seem to illustrate this. They are paired up and encouraged to say something affirming about each other. "Some girls can't seem to find anything to say. But with the way some feel about themselves, it's hard to say anything positive about others."

Other challenges are found at the opposite end of the spectrum - noting having enough adult women to mentor the girls. Clarke believes that some grown women are "just as broken as some of the girls. But the key is to give out of that brokenness. That is where healing can come from. In dealing with the girls, you can deal with and begin to mend yourself."

STEP OUT AND BE BOLD

Clarke's encouragement to would-be mentors and volunteers is simple. "Step out and be bold. Some women don't think they have anything to give. A lack of knowledge about mentorship may also make them nervous. They believe they don't have the skills to approach the girls and they're intimidated. My encouragement is for us women to be ourselves and give out of whatever we've learnt and experienced in life. If you look at it like that you can impact the girls at all

levels. And that builds self-esteem. Low self-esteem is a big issue for women."

Gibson adds that women, who want to share openly, are both valuable and needed. "There seems to be a lack of transparency," she states.

As a mother to three daughters and two sons, Clarke's top priority is for them to have a relationship with God. "Everything comes out of your relationship with Him."

While there is much work to be done, Clarke is quick to acknowledge the successes thus far. From seeing persons and corporations embrace the vision of the programme, to recognizing change and maturity in the girls' decisions. "It's amazing to see all these girls positively impacted. We go all out to help them," Gibson adds.



Joy Gibson with one of the Queens at a training session at COB

VISION OF LIVE-IN FACILITY

Not one to rest on its laurels, the charity is looking to develop workshops for girls over 16 under the name 'Jewels'. Another area of focus will be women in church groups. In five years the vision is for a live-in facility to be established, and for a

presence in at least one other Caribbean island, perhaps Grenada. A four-week summer programme is also in the works.

After she recounts the experience of some of the girls swimming in a pool for the first time, Clarke looks wistful and remembers a sunny moment from her own youth. A father-figure provided tennis

lessons for her when she was a pre-teen. "He taught me to dream; he wanted to show me that there was more beyond my world," she said. Now The Queens is helping hundreds of Barbadian girls to do the same. "Our daughters belong to us all," she intones.



A Queens Workshop at the home of Rob and Mary Cottrell

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