



## **GENERATIONS OF CHANGE: O.K. PROGRAM WORKS TO BUILD A NEW GENERATION OF BLACK MEN**

At eight years old, Michael joined one of the most infamous and largest gangs in the country. By the time he entered middle school; he was 'shot out' of that gang and moved cross-country to Indianapolis.

Fast-forward to 2010: Michael is now a junior at Arlington High School; holds a 3.0 GPA striving towards a 4.0; mentors middle school students; and is in talks with colleges for scholarships after he graduates.

Michael's life story is just one of many changed and rewritten by the O.K. (Our Kids) Program of Indianapolis. The nationwide O.K. program strives to provide mentorship and positive role modeling to young black men susceptible to violent activities.

After joining O.K. in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Jamal went from a 1.7 GPA to 3.0. As a senior about to graduate from Arlington, Jamal looks forward to a full ride scholarship to Ball State University next fall with a walk-on spot on the university debate team.

Spearheaded by Dr. Jacqueline Greenwood and Pastor David Green (Second Baptist Church) and started locally in 2005 by IMPD Sergeant Timothy Knight, the O.K. program now works with approximately 370 students at Arlington High school, all with similar stories to Michael and Jamal. The program is looking to expand into three more schools in the coming year.

With 18 years in law enforcement, eight of which were spent in a homicide unit, Sergeant Timothy Knight decided to reverse the system. Creating an alternative for black males, Knight now spends much of his time preventing young black men from winding up on police radar and becoming another one of the over 10,000 black males already incarcerated within Indiana.

Black males make up only 4 percent of the State's population, yet they make up 38 percent of the incarcerated population in Indiana (*Indiana Commission on the Social Status of Black Males, 2008-2009 Annual Report.*)

Knight, along with five other IMPD officers and sergeants, work with the students, 12-18 years old to not only raise GPAs and self-esteem, but most importantly, serve as strong black male role models and father-figures.

Many of the O.K. students live in neighborhoods where gang violence, crime, drugs, prostitution and single-parent households with absent fathers are the norm. Nearly 30% of the black population within the United States is single-parent households, with no father present (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey*).

That's where the O.K. officers and sergeants step in.

Michael's last memory of his father was at 10-years-old when his father threw him through a window. He has only heard from his father once since the incident.

Prior to entering the OK Program, Richard was deemed a “frequent flyer” due to his constant “fight response” in any situation. Now a mentor and role model, Richard has successfully reached out to other OK students to stop the cycle of madness.

Kelsey, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade O.K. student, hears from his father every once in a while. The latest encounter, his Dad promised to pick him up on Friday night and spend the weekend with him. After more than three hours of waiting and many unanswered calls, Kelsey was left with another disappointment brought on by his father.

One-by-one, each student tells similar stories of absent fathers and broken promises.

Despite it all though, these young men aren’t letting it hold them back for long.

“The Officers are the closest thing to a father I’ve ever had,” Chris said, Sophomore O.K. student, “If I had a problem, I wouldn’t call my Father in New York, I’d call them [OK officers].”

The O.K. leaders are on call to the students around the clock, whether it is in person, via phone calls at 3 AM or text messages throughout the day. O.K. provides the student with a stable family environment that may be lacking at home while also offering an escape from other harsh realities of growing up too fast.

After his father left and older brother was jailed, Darian, 16, now plays father-figure to his younger siblings at home, “I’m the only one at home who’s trying to do something with my life,” Darian said.

Driven to do more, Darian reports that after joining O.K. his GPA went from a 2.0 to a 3.1 and rising. Additionally, he’s learning valuable conflict resolution tactics and has learned to “attack the issue not the person.”

Jamal, who did not have a relationship with his father until this year, sums it best; “Sergeant Knight and the officers are my fathers,” he said. “You’ve got to have a *father-figure* but you don’t have to have a father.”

As a senior, Jamal’s options are wide open and he is currently trying to decide whether to become a lawyer, doctor, teacher or cop.

The focal point of the program revolves around ‘KIC-IT Sessions’ (Kids Interacting Immix Teammates) every Saturday afternoon. The youth gather at Arlington High School during a time when many are known to get into trouble, the weekends. The sessions typically include a guest speaker covering a topic of real-world importance to the kids, followed by catered lunches and a recreation activity.

“One of the goals of O.K. is to teach social intelligence,” Sgt. Knight said.

This social intelligence is addressed during KIC-IT sessions and ranges from business etiquette to politics, recent world news and conflict resolution strategies. Featured guests have included State Representatives John Bartlett and Julia Carson, and former Indiana Pacers player George McGinnis.

“Every Saturday I learn something new and everyday it comes to use,” Peter said, 8<sup>th</sup> grader in his 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the program.

McGinnis took his contribution a step further and helped provide funds to O.K. He struck a deal with food vendors with the terms that they pay half and he pays half.

He is not alone though, the O.K. program has also drawn attention from other big contributors such as the Rotary Club of Indianapolis. Over the last three years Rotary donated more than \$75,000 to the O.K. Program. Additionally Judge David Dreyer, an Indianapolis Rotary Club member sits on the O.K. Board of Directors and is active in the program's growth and development.

"Rotary Club helped finance us so we don't have to spend time fundraising. Instead we can spend time working with the kids," John Pettway said, Secretary of O.K. Chapter Council and Security Dad at Arlington.

According to Indianapolis Rotary Club President, Mark Blade, "by partnering with the O.K. Program we are helping to make a difference within the community. It is both an honor and privilege to work with Sgt. Knight and help reverse the cycle. Our efforts will positively impact current and future generations."

Such funds also allow students to travel to historical landmarks such as the Underground Freedom Center in Ohio, The Smithsonian Institute, the monuments of Washington D.C. and even the Pentagon. None of which, Knight said would be possible without donations from the Rotary Club.

"It's one thing to see historical monuments in the movies or on TV but it gives you stories and wisdom to tell your kids about when you're older," Brandon said, Arlington Senior and 5 year O.K. member.

On these trips, the students receive compliments on their disciplined, well-mannered, behavior which has even garnered spur-of-the-moment donations from traveling strangers.

Through mentorship and education, Knight and other O.K. leaders hope to establish a new generation of young black men and squelch the number of them ending up victims of violence in prison or the morgue.

"We let them know that there are strong black men to help you," Pettway said.  
"You don't need to make mistakes, learn from ours," he adds.

While it's a family environment, lead by mentors and police, the students seek responsibility in the process as well.

"It's a student-run program. The officers may be head of program but we're the student council and we're the ones that speak for students," Jamal said. "If students aren't willing to change, the school won't change."

Jamal added that he and other O.K. graduates plan to return to teach and mentor younger generations and continue the generation of change.

While the program strives to educate, they also serve as a form of escapism. Knight acknowledges that it is not O.K.'s purpose to fix broken lives at home but rather "teach the students to compartmentalize their lives in order to shut out the noise and focus on school work," he said.

According to their GPAs, they're succeeding.

"[O.K.] saves not only students, but lives" Cletus Morris said, Dean of Arlington High School.

The O.K. Program's success rate is staggering. Nationally, 2% of O.K. Graduates take up trades, 8% serve in the military, and 90% go to college. Locally, the O.K. Program of Indianapolis has had 31 of 32 graduates go to college and one go to the Marine Corps.

Simply put, the O.K. Program works and saves lives. One person at a time, one life at a time, the O.K. Program is successfully building a new, strong, and productive generation of black leaders within our community.

**Special Thanks to the following young men who openly shared their stories:**

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Brandon (President of OK Student Council)  
Brandon  
Christopher  
Darian  
Dwayne  
Gabriel  
Jamal (VP of Student Council for OK)  
Jay  
Kelsey  
Michael (Kick Off Mentor)  
Peter  
Richard (Kick Off Mentor)  
Sam (Alumni – Little Rock, AR – Baptist College)  
Timothy (Secretary of OK Student Council)

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Officer K. Adams – IMPD  
Officer B. Jackson – IMPD  
Dr. Jacqueline Greenwood  
Pastor David Green, Second Baptist Church  
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Cletus Morris – Dean of Discipline, Arlington H.S.  
Manana Walker – Special Ed Teacher, Arlington H.S.  
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