Fourth World People’s University
May 20, 2017: Sustaining Family Life
Report

1. Introduction

Participants: Aïssatou, Betty, Christelle, Cristina, Emma, Errik aka « T », Flore, Gia, Guillaume, Jadora, Josiane, Jeff, Justine, Kara, Kimberly, Lisa, Marcia, Marie-Claire, Monica, Miguel, Naqaash, Patrick, Savita, Stacy, Theresa, Tina, Virginie, Yama, Yvette, Zena (Babette and Irati took care of ten children of activists and volunteers).

Guests: Kimberlina Kavern, Safe Horizon
        Lynda Nicolas, NYCELL (Early Literacy Learning)

The three peer groups met on May 12, one week before the People’s University session, to prepare presentations for our guests. The theme for the day: Sustaining Family Life.

The following questions guided our preparation and dialogue during the Fourth World People's University session:

• Present the item you brought to explain what family life means for you
• Describe a good family time (when I read a book with my child; when we’re having a meal together, etc.)
• What keeps the family spirit alive? Even when we are not together, what make us feel together? What are the efforts we make to keep our family united? What support (friends, grandparents, social workers, etc.) do we have now to stay united?
• What support would we need to keep our family united?

We read our guests’ bios before starting the presentations:

Kimberlina Kavern, Senior Director
Crime Victim Assistance Program at Safe Horizon

The mission of Safe Horizon is to provide support, prevent violence, and promote justice for victims of crime and abuse, their families and communities. Kimberlina previously held the roles of Director of the Bronx Family Court Program, Chief of Staff, and Director of the Staten Island Criminal Court and Police Programs at Safe Horizon. She has also worked for Safe Horizon as a Senior Case Manager and chair of the Bronx Family Court Domestic Violence Awareness Month Committee, and the co-chair of the Staten Island Partnership for Community Wellness-Domestic Violence Committee.

Kimberlina provides training for agencies such as the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, New York City Housing Authority, New York City Police Department, the New York Peace Institute, and New York University, among others. She was also trainer for the new Family Court Online Advocate Assisted Family Offense Petition Program, which piloted in Bronx Family Court. Kimberlina completed her undergraduate studies in music at California
Lynda R. Nicolas, Early Childhood Education Administrator  
New York City Department of Education

For 28 years Lynda R. Nicolas has been an educator with the New York City Department of Education in many capacities. She was a second-grade classroom teacher, literacy specialist and teacher in charge of the P.S. 138 Early Childhood Center Annex. She supervised 14 teachers and educational assistants who supported prekindergarten students and their families. Lynda has earned her Master of Science degree in elementary education and received her advanced certificate in school administration and supervision.

Currently, as a member of the Division of Early Childhood Education, she is the Citywide New York City Early Literacy Learning (NYCELL) Coordinator. She supervises a staff of five family literacy associates, who deliver the research based NYCELL curriculum to parents and their infant and toddlers. The program demonstrates the importance of early literacy through verbal interaction and play between parents and their children. Parents receive free books and educational toys to continue the strategies they learned from NYCELL at home and on the go.

2. Preparation notes presented by the peer groups

On May 12, 2017, Activists, Allies and Volunteers groups created paper flowers describing what keeps family spirit alive and what kinds of support families need. We made flowers because during a meeting of the preparation team, Patrick said: “Can we separate the pistil and the petals and still say we have a family?”

The lists below reflect what was written in the center (pistil) and what was captured in each of the petals. The flowers were posted on the wall during the People’s University session on May 20, and each peer group read its discoveries (which are outlined in the following section) to the guests and entire People’s University gathering.

I. Flower of the Allies

Participants: Christelle, Dave, Jen, Josiane, Justine, Marie-Claire, Miguel, Rolina, Theresa, Yvette  
Facilitator: Kara

What keeps the family spirit alive?

Safe space  
Keeping and making traditions  
Meals  
Sharing pictures  
Having fun together
Consistent communication (emails, gifts, postcards)
Making time and showing interest
Respecting each other

**What support do we need to keep the family united?**

Understand family, cultural, generational differences
Visit France more frequently
After-school program
Family dish
Example of my parents’ families
As a spouse, be patient
As a mom, learn to let go
As a grandma, be healthy and teach about tradition
As myself, enjoy life
Knowing when and how to step in if family members are having psychological difficulties
Finding a balance between being present and not imposing myself
Forgiveness, helpful encouragement, egoless motivation, respect each other's feelings
How to communicate about issues without adding to them

**II. Flower of the Activists**

Participants: Betty, Errik, Flore, Jeff, Kim, Stacy, Yama, Zena
Facilitators: Emma and Patrick

**What keeps the family spirit alive?**

Communication
Agape love
Support
Hope
God
Interaction
Love
Unity

**What support do we need to keep the family united?**

Knowledge
Family, friends, love, support
Empathy
Understanding
One presence
Understanding and coming together
Family support
Get together (meetings)
III. Flower of the Volunteers

Participants: Anne-Claire, Cristina, Guillaume, Monica
Facilitators: Marcia and Virginie

What keeps the family spirit alive?

Remembering about the past
Passing family quality time
Taking important decisions together
Communication
Sharing memories
Caring for each other
Not being afraid to say "I love you"
Contemplation
Thinking about loved ones

What support do we need to keep the family united?

We have each other’s backs (without asking)
To have a family house
Places where children are happy to meet others and to learn
To share knowledge to make you proud about your history and identity
To be able to rely on your extended family/community
Sharing with my peers (friends, cousins, etc.)
Training in Family Constellation
Encouragement, not judgement

3. Key points from our guests

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<tr>
<th>Kimberlina Kavern</th>
<th>Lynda Nicolas</th>
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<td>If you are a victim of a crime, regardless of your age, we can provide you with services. Safe Horizon works with victims of all types of crime. Part of our role is educating clients that domestic violence is actually not okay. Mental and emotional abuse is harder to heal from than physical abuse.</td>
<td>We want to be able to use everyday activities to enhance the relationship you have with your child. Don’t be in a rush to leave things as they are. I want to use that experience to build on that conversation, to build that child’s interest. That’s the bond, that’s where it starts.</td>
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**Lynda:** Family meal time, the generational, the culture — all those things that are so important, we need to put those in place to support the family. That’s exactly what we do in my program. We try to make sure what their role is in supporting children living in poverty. The parents are the first contact the children have. They need to have significant attachment with the parents in
order to get through in life. Family is the basis for that to happen. The children need to know the parent is there for them. That is that base for the bonding. Everything was so moving — the agape love, for example. I wrote everything down. It was an affirmation for what we’ve been doing; we are on track.

**Kimberlina:** I love the flowers and want to bring them with me to refer to. I work with domestic violence, among both men and women. Family means different things to different people. My job is not to get them to leave, it’s really to support them where they are and help them to feel safer whether they plan to stay or leave their family. What we know is that when people are dealing with trauma, they are being pulled in a lot of directions themselves. It was reaffirming and centering for me to be reminded of what family looked like for different people and what is needed to feel supported.

4. **Dialogue among the participants and the guests (excerpts)**

**Family and education:**

- ATD Fourth World, they became my family, including the guests today. I am a single mother of six including one who is deceased. I decided to end a relationship and show my five boys it can be done as a single parent, by myself. Ms. Lynda said that education is our backbone. The reasons I said knowledge and education is because without that, we wouldn't all be here having this lovely dialogue because we would have nothing to talk about.

- I understood you can’t just send your child to school. You have to bond with them; you must be a part of their education, in every way you possibly can.

- I am an activist for the disabled. I, too, never had a family to stay with but I understand what it means inside. I can bring understanding to children, be sensitive and loving and caring. When my child was (put up for adoption), we went to City Hall and appealed to many organizations. Disabled people are considered outcast, demonized.

- **Lynda:** Sustaining family life in New York City, what can we do as parents? I thought of using everyday activities as teachable moments for families and children. So many of the words you used rang a bell for me: communication, sharing, being part of a family. So, when you're taking a walk with your child, have a conversation about what you are experiencing, about where you are going, so that increases their vocabulary without having to spend any money for it. Whatever you are experiencing, make it a teachable moment and build the bonds of the family. All the experiences you share build family and at the same time build knowledge through communication and sharing, making every day a learning opportunity.

**Understanding and empathy**
• When I saw the activist flower, they twice mention understanding, and the word empathy. That is something to think about together, what does it mean, "understanding," and from whom?

• Empathy is something you haven’t been through, but you can understand it through empathy even though you haven’t experienced it.

• When, all six of us went to five destinations around the country, first, we communicated how we were different from our parents and that we came from the same family tree. Sympathy and understanding were needed to try to understand this process (of finding out who we are). There is not just one way. The interesting thing for me is not running away from “my way or the highway.” What is interesting is finding ways to see family members and support them.

• Kimberlina: I want to hire people to work on my team who feel very passionate about this work. I want you to be present for every single person who sits in front of you, because there are consequences if you can’t do that. If you can’t feel empathy for the person who sits in front of you, I don’t think it’s the right place for you.

• When people (like myself) came to the city, it was not easy at all. The truth involves a lot of emotion. We bring a lot of love, and we want to bring understanding. The family is your goal; it's not dependent on money. Somebody lives somewhere and you love them. We have just one life; we don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow.

The child welfare system

• In the context of ATD Fourth World, where I have seen many, many ways of families and parenting, I did this training in family constellations and learned the saying: All parents are good parents, no exceptions. When I came to the U.S., I learned about children's services, the laws, and what a mother is supposed to do. I started to feel fear as a mother. As a mother I give my daughter a lot of freedom because I trust her. And then, parents were telling me you cannot do that because children’s services will come. For the first time in my life I was considering, how do I as a mother consider these things about what other people were saying are good and bad? I think you can be a good support with families only if you understand that all parents are good parents.

• I went through the child welfare system. I didn’t know anything about it until they came to my house. I thought they were from the school. I didn’t know who they were. Like she said, once you find out [about child protection laws], you live in fear that you have to treat your child this way, that way. My children went into the system on falsified information. My children were abused in the system. I fought 13 years for my children. Don’t ever give up on your child. I promise I will try to help.

• I had my kids taken away because I didn’t have family. Everything they said I should be doing, I was doing, and I got my kids back. There are a lot of biases. People of color are the largest numbers being taken away.
Most times, it is families in poverty that this type of thing happens to.

**Kimberlina:** Our goal in Safe Horizon is to connect people to whatever they need. My job is to listen to all the different things that are impacting you and making it more challenging, because the other thing we know is that when you are dealing with people in poverty, they are dealing with a lot of systems, and systems put a lot of requirements on people, and there’s not a lot of understanding for what people are going through. Our job is to be able to hear those things and think, How can I help you with this? For example, going into a shelter is a really disruptive system in a lot of ways. We might be able to come up with a safe relative you can stay with. I am the first to acknowledge that the systems are very flawed. They have unreasonable expectations that certainly impact people of color and people living in poverty at unfair rates.

**About young people**

- About Safe Horizon, do you work with juvenile justice?
- Do you have a program that would give troubled young people a chance to start over?

**Kimberlina:** Young people who need services not related to being a victim of a crime — we wouldn’t work directly with those folks; we would refer them to someone else. But if domestic violence is part of their experience, we would work around the victimization. Technically our client is the victim. In my program we reach out to every victim who's on a police report, so if your wallet gets stolen, we’re going to give you a call and talk about identity theft and how to protect yourself. At Safe Horizon we don’t do prevention work. Our role is to respond after a crime, but there are a lot of good organizations that offer other services.

**Domestic violence**

- **Kimberlina:** Safe Horizon is the biggest victim services agency in the country — victims of all crimes, not just domestic violence. We run the 24-hour hotline, the largest number of shelter beds for victims, legal services, and immigration services for victims. We have programs in all the courts in New York City; on top of that we have programs for anti-trafficking, at-risk homeless youth, children who have been physically or sexually abused, and victims of rape, homicide, and assault. The program I oversee is new last year, the crime victim assistance program, which places two advocates in every police precinct in the city. Safe Horizon is 40 years old. We are in 26 precincts, and growing this summer. We look at every single police report and make calls to victims to see what they need, to see that they understand the criminal justice system. If they need lawyers, we can connect them with lawyers, social services, or financial services; and then, of course we also work with victims who walk into precincts.

- My first experience as a crime victim at 17 years old, I had to fill out a form and they never got back to me until today. It wasn’t you [the Safe Horizon program]; I was just
carrying that burden. I apologize for (thinking Safe Horizon gave me) that bad feeling stay there [at Safe Horizon] and do what you do. You have a hard job with domestic violence. First it’s not seen, and, when it becomes apparent, it’s very hard for people to come out of.

- I am an activist and can help a lot of people. It’s good to know of you and to refer people who need your services.

What constitutes your definition of domestic violence? Does it always have to be physical?

- **Kimberlina:** Definitely the answer is, no. So if you walk into our office and say you are a survivor of domestic violence you don’t have to have an order of protection or a police report. I would say most of our clients haven’t suffered physical abuse either, because that’s not the dynamic in their relationship; or, we know that domestic violence tends to escalate, so it might be present and has not reached that point yet.

To wrap up our dialogue, do either of our guests have a story that encourages?

- **Lynda:** A child and mom are in the supermarket and the child says, "What is that?" And the mom says, "I don’t know what it is; we've got things to do." So she moves on, and that’s the end of that conversation. The next mother comes and the child says, "What is that?" And the mother says, "I think that’s an eggplant, but I don’t know what it is; we don’t eat it." And she moves on. The third parent comes, and the child says the same thing: "Mom, what is that?" And the mom says, "Oh, that’s an eggplant. We don’t usually eat it, but there’s a dish called eggplant parmesan that’s similar to chicken parmesan. Maybe we could buy it, get a recipe, and cook it at home?" And, in telling this story, I want to say that we all want to be that third parent. That child is interested about something. Build on it.

*The meeting ended with discussion continuing over supper both for the prep meeting May 12 and the People’s University session May 20. After our preparation meeting on May 12, ATD volunteers Eugen, Anne-Claire, Siméon, and Damien shared their experiences of their travels around the world. They visited ATD New York when making the film, *Who Have We Become?*

Note: *For this report, the prep team selected quotes that most closely aligned with the theme for the day: Sustaining Family Life. If you would like to read the transcription of the recorded two hours, please send an email request to nycteam@4thworldmovement.org*

**Report compiled by Fourth World People’s University New York prep team:**
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