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For Mothers for Justice and Equality, being trauma informed is key

The nonprofit, which was founded in 2010, is led by women and aims to protect youth from violence

By **Ellie Wolfe** Globe Correspondent, September 7, 2023



Monalisa Smith, founder, president, and CEO of Mothers for Justice and Equality, discussed organizational changes with adult education program manager Alie Bernado. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Considering the circumstances, Mattapan’s Walker playground was bustling on the morning of July 14. The day before, 12-year-old Savion Ellis was killed just one street over, in a seemingly accidental shooting that rocked the neighborhood.

The next day, teens were moving around the area quickly, setting up tables, chairs, and pamphlets. The group was with [Mothers for Justice and Equality](#), a nonprofit aiming to eradicate violence in Boston and beyond. The organization goes to

parks and outdoor spaces in areas that have recently seen violence in an effort to get people back outside and socialize with their community. They were organizing a STEM workshop that day with crafts and experiments for kids and families.

Monalisa Smith, a former banker who founded the group in 2010, said the nonprofit’s purpose is simple: “Show that our lives matter.”

“To get our mothers and children very active in this movement will change the story of our streets,” Smith said in an interview with the Globe.

Eliminating violence is not just about organizing and protesting, she said, it’s also about supporting those who have experienced loss firsthand.

To that end, the nonprofit offers self-care classes, college tours, technology training, weekly Zumba and dance classes, and high-intensity interval training workouts. They also offer an eight-week-long program for middle schoolers to learn about STEM, and another for young parents to learn life skills and gain support. They even pay high school students to organize pop-up workshops in neighborhoods dealing with tragedy.

Last year, the organization distributed 100 Thanksgiving food baskets, served 1,000 children through Toys for Tots, supported 50 families monthly with rental assistance applications, and gifted 200 families with groceries or grocery gift cards, according to its impact report.

Smith estimates that about 90 percent of the nonprofit's clients are victims of trauma, so being trauma informed — or understanding that a person is more likely than not to have experienced dangerous situations — is key to their success, she said.

It is up to the nonprofit, she said, to recognize and help traumatized people push through mental blocks to complete necessary work, such as filling out housing and job applications.

“Their resistance is not because they're lazy, or they don't want to do it, it's because there's some emotional things that have happened to them that is causing them to not be able to perform the simplest task,” Smith said.

Their work, especially their youth program, is important in combatting a growing trend in adolescent violence, she added. A recent poll of parents of Boston Public School students by MassINC [found 68 percent of parents](#) were very or somewhat concerned about their child's physical safety while at school, and 70 percent were concerned about their children's emotional well-being.

To be sure, officials are trying to solve the violence in Greater Boston. Suffolk County District Attorney Kevin Hayden recently announced the creation of a [Youth Advisory Council](#) to work on reducing youth violence. Mayor Michelle Wu's administration just launched a new city task force aimed at reducing shootings in a handful of small locations where an outsize amount of street violence happens.

But community-based organizations such as Mothers for Justice and Equality help fill in gaps where there is need, and gain support from the city and state to do so.

Mothers for Justice and Equality, for example, received funding from the city last year through its Youth Development Fund. It also offers workshops for other nonprofits and relies on grassroots fundraising and grants from the city, the state, and private organizations.

Smith said their approach has “worked, and as a result of that, we were able to build a staff from two people to about 20.”

Still, it can be hard for the nonprofit's employees to keep up, especially as they deal with their own trauma.

Aretha Maugé is the group's outreach coordinator. Her son, Devonte Maugé-Franklin, was stabbed to death in 2008 in a still-unsolved murder when he was 16. That pain is still present in Maugé's life, she said, and is, in part, why she dedicates so much time to the organization.

“I want to do things to support women that I didn't get because it makes it so much easier,” Maugé said, after pausing to collect herself. “You don't have time to think about what you're going to cook tonight or whether or not you need toiletries.”

In cases of tragedy like hers, Maugé and the nonprofit step in, gifting supplies and support to families in need. Most of the group's employees are women (just three men make up a staff of 18, according to its website), and all have a relationship with violence and tragedy.



Monalisa Smith glances at some healing artwork by mothers who lost children to violence. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

“I remember when I started this, someone said to me that it’s a club that you don’t want to be a part of,” Smith said. “You don’t want to join this club. But unfortunately, it finds you.”

Despite the hardships, the community formed within the group is life-changing, said Arielle Romain, the group’s health equity program manager.

“It’s so amazing to work amongst people that are so

resilient,” she said. “The love they have for the community and the work they do empowers me to keep pushing.”