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## Raising their Children

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# Raising their Children

**Abstract**

This personal essay depicts the story of an after school program established in the heart of a low-income neighborhood. It details the struggle the local children face in their failing schools district, and shows how the program, known as Little Wise Child, has been instrumental in making a positive difference in their lives.

**Keywords**

Children, Education, Poverty, Bronx, After School

**Disciplines**

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Creative Writing | Education | Latina/o Studies | Nonfiction | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

**Comments**

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## Raising their Children

This is a story about elementary school students from Bronx, New York but begins with the country of Jamaica. If you were to travel there, perhaps on vacation for a brief respite, your travel agent might hand you a glossy aquamarine pamphlet boasting light sands and a placid turquoise sea. As you thumb through the brochure, now pulling it apart like an accordion, you would notice the pristine waves cresting on the bright pages, white foam rimming the brim of each swell. Your agent would show you all these superficial trappings, not thinking to suggest that you visit the more trafficked parts of the island where the urban sprawl bakes under the dry heat of a bold sun, and children run barefoot through the market place, peddling sweet guinep<sup>1</sup> and gizzada<sup>2</sup> in tiny plastic bags.

The British settled this lush land in the 1600's, displacing the Spanish colonists and the native Arawak Indians, and pulling a large West African population in tow. In the dry heats and warm rains, black hands pulled up a fruitful bounty of sugarcane from the soil.

This is a place of sweet fruits, lizards and patois<sup>3</sup>. This is a country of emigrants for whom the irresistible pull of the United States beckons relentlessly. This is a land whose air hangs heavy with a spicy freedom; it lingers on the dusty skins of the children raised in the shade of a mango tree, and envelopes the mothers who sauté round pots of ackee and saltfish in the afternoon.

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<sup>1</sup> A fruit found in tropical regions with a sweet yellow center and hard green outer shell.

<sup>2</sup> A hard pastry shell filled with spiced coconut shavings found in Jamaican cuisine.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounced pat-wa, it refers to the name of a dialect that is spoken in Jamaica in lower social circles

Much of this flavor remains when families uproot from Jamaica to sink into new soil. Bronx, New York is one such place; a large heaving metropolis, raging like a swift river whose tributaries filter out to become quiet winding streams, and quiet city blocks. Our story begins on a street named Palmer Avenue. These two worlds slip into one another on the first floor of one of the homes on this street, and form the after-school program called “Little Wise Child”.

To get there by foot you must get off of the uptown bound number five train at the Baychester Avenue stop. After exiting the station, turn left and walk three hundred feet past the corner deli and the Jamaican food shop, past the newly erected liquor store with its psychedelic flashing signs and the auto mechanic place. Keep going straight; the looped driveway of the KFC drive through will loom up on the left, but don't stop until you reach the Boston Road intersection. There are two crossing options. If you take the crosswalk to the right then left, you'll be brought first to a gas station bustling with black cabs and four door mini-vans, and then the Oasis Motel with its dull tan paint and light-up palm tree window display. Or you can cross first to the left then to the right, which would instead bring you to the corner of P.S 98, a new public school with a high gate and primary-colored playground, and eventually to the same bland motel. To continue on from here, walk down two blocks alongside Boston Road passing yet another deli with a group of surly men loitering out front, an awning printing shop, and a high grey chain-link fence enclosing what many locals believe to be an abandoned power plant. Turn left once you get to Palmer Avenue and straight ahead, up one flat block and a steep hill, you will find 3607 Palmer Avenue, and Little Wise Child itself.

\* \* \*

My mother, the Director of Little Wise Child, grew up in Jamaica, just like most of the parents whose children are enrolled in her after-school program. She was one of six children living in Kingston in a big cream-colored house, accessed by a long hilly driveway. Her father was the pastor of a large church and she was the director of the children's choir. She always loved children; she would take her *little angels* as she called her choir members back then, to the large house on the hill for fun weekends.

Later when she moved to the United States at age eighteen, she poured her affections into the children she nannied for, balancing the teetering stack of demands of a caregiver by day and part-time college student at night. When I came along in the summer of her twenty-ninth year, she tethered me to her own fixed ideal; the pursuit of education. West Side Montessori, a private preschool on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, became the stumbling ground for my four-year-old self. Later I was enrolled in Spence a competitive all-girls private school, becoming part of the five percent diversity quota they boasted about on their marketing pamphlets. Still, in spite of the hour-long commute and homogeneousness of the place, I loved school.

Mom established Little Wise Child while I was in the third grade. Many of her Jamaican friends would confided in her, explaining that they were unable to help their children with their homework because of work conflicts or just a general lack of content knowledge. My mom decided to cater to this need. What started as five students in the living of our three-bedroom apartment proliferated quickly to forty in a new Palmer Avenue premises under the gentle ministrations of my mother's hand. Today the program is nestled across the street from our house, on the ground floor of our neighbor Mrs. Beverly's two-story home. Because the program's main objective is to assist

moderate to low-income families, we recruit the students that attend the two closest failing schools, P.S. 111 and The Bronx Charter School for Better Learning. The children typically come to us in kindergarten and stay until the fifth grade. In recent years, the program has expanded to include a summer camp, which many of the children also attend in the months of June through August. They wear cotton t-shirts with the name Smart Alex Summer Camp emblazoned on the front on trip days, which occur twice a week. If it wasn't for my mother (Ms. Thompson as everybody calls her) and this local camp, many of these children would never have gone horseback riding, or tried yoga; they wouldn't be making the honor roll, or even know how to swim.

“We left Jamaica for our children.” This is the sentiment spouted by many of the parents who find Little Wise Child once they make it to the U.S. shore. Many confide that they have come to seek a better life for themselves and their children, yet their aspirations fall short of real success when their kids falter in failing school districts, hampered by the limitations of a lower-class life. I have seen this claim, when held up to scrutiny, fall apart under the gaze of a brighter light. In many cases, the needs of the children are not being met due to limited funds and economic opportunities for their families, but sometimes a parent's lackadaisical attitude towards the general wellbeing of the child will catch us off guard.

One day one of our after-schoolers, a little girl named Cheyenne, once told me that she never eats fruit at home. During her first week at Little Wise Child, her eyes would widen in alarm during snack time when the fresh fruit bowl was passed around. “What is it” she'd inquire, gingerly picking up the blue popsicle stick on which a fruit slice was impaled. “It's an orange,” I explained, but no amount of coaxing and bribery

could entice her to eat it. Her mother's response, when the incident was recounted to her at the end of the day was to laugh deeply. Apparently Cheyenne's mother had never eaten a fruit in her life either. It was hard to believe, especially because the mother herself had grown up in Jamaica where fruits grow in great abundance; but even more unnerving was the notion that nutrition and healthy eating were not considered a priority.

When people ask my mother why she chooses to work primarily with a poorer demographic, she explains to them that teaching these children is like an indescribable high. "I don't want to teach those wealthy kids I used to babysit for in Manhattan; they have the resources they need to succeed. These kids here in the Bronx, they need me, because they don't have anyone to show them what could be." I understand this, too, because I have seen it while I've worked with the children both in the Little Wise Child and the Smart Alex Summer Camp; it's amazing how much they flourish the moment someone starts believing in them.

\* \* \*

A typical day for the staff of the Little Wise Child after-school program begins with a trip down the street. At 3:00pm sharp yellow busses trundle up Palmer Avenue's steep hill towards P.S. 111 and the Charter School. If four workers are tutoring that day, we will all make the five minute walk over from 3607 Palmer Avenue together. We hit the charter school first, and I stop to collect those students outside. The kindergarteners and first graders stand huddled around their teacher's legs by the ramp leading up to the school entrance; once they spot me they waddle over, holding a glittering art project or box, and prodding me to guess what it is. Before I can answer, you've been hit in the

back by several tiny bodies, and I know the rest of the Charter School students have been released through the back door.

I notice Chiara has a scowl on her face, and when I ask her what's wrong she tells me that her teacher gave her too much homework. Kal-el and Jayden Palmer (one of three Jaydens) are comparing their backpacks' super hero characters, while Cheyenne and her ever loyal gaggle of girls play hand games nearby.

Meanwhile up at P.S. 111, the other two workers have entered the auditorium accessed by the public school's side door. You spot Jaydez first because he has a rather large head and, his bounding frame is always in a state of vibration. He knows where to look for you, twisting in his seat to see the auditorium doors that the collecting parents emerge through. He lets out a mad cackle once you arrive, grabbing his things with tiny fists and waving ecstatically, as if you wouldn't recognize him. You make your way down the stairs, because you need to sign the kids out. Behind Jaydez, Maya and Jeremy are pulling on hats and coats. They grab a buddy and follow you to the door.

Next you collect the children waiting in P.S. 111's cafeteria. Desiree (Dezzie) sits primly next to her teacher, her mousy voice reflecting on the day's events. "Well, I have to go now," she says and you reach for the teacher's clipboard and sign your name. "School was just awesome today," she quips while you squeeze her shoulder and lead her and the other after-schoolers towards the doors. You and your co-worker sandwich the little group, one leading, and one taking up the rear, to meet up with the charter school kids.

After the two school groups have merged we make our way to Little Wise Child. On certain days, the group might take a detour to the local park. The children love this.



Sometimes on winter days if it has snowed the night before, my mother will bring sleds for the children to ride on after dismissal. The first snowfall of the year is always a special time for the youngest members of the after-school because most of them have never been sledding before. Initially they watch the older kids with looks of trepidation, marveling at the dark puffy coats zipping down the powdered hills next to the park. After their first sled ride however, there's no returning. We make hot chocolate for all of the children when we get back to the after-school in a large electric kettle, and the children blow on their fingers, bemoaning lost gloves and comparing the number of marshmallows they have in their mini pastel cups.

The inside of the after-school is a large open space; the light blue walls boast posters about telling time and maps of the world. Just within the reach of a small child, little metal hooks are hung for the kids to hang their coats on. The tables are long and rectangular with hard plastic tops, and are surrounded by foldable chairs that provide sturdy seating. The space is warm, insulated by a green carpet and the forty little bodies, fumbling through backpacks, extracting folders, and starting their homework.

\* \* \*

These children do not go to good schools, and often their parents won't take them to the park or even let them leave their homes during weekends. Many of their parents have expressed they do not see the necessity of taking trips outside, so for most of the students, their exposure to extracurricular activities is completely dependent on the Little Wise Child Program. Once a week the children travel from the premises via large burgundy vans to the Bronx YMCA to take swimming lessons. After changing into their bathing suits in the Y's locker room and wetting their bodies in the shower, the children

line the edge of the pool. The shortest ones look frightened as they perspire softly in the on the humid deck, clutching one another's hands. For most of them this is the first time they have ever taken a swimming lesson, and the fear is apparent on their small dark faces. Mom strolls behind the row of brightly colored suits, fastening life belts around skinny waists and bending down to whisper encouragement in each child's ear. They all tremble in spite of the heat, shoulders knocking into neighbors. The swim instructor beckons Kayla first but she shrinks back in fear, refusing to reach out for his arms or to submerge herself in the pool's aquamarine depths.

Taking the plunge is the first and most difficult step. Some children, like Cameron, a third grade girl with long braids, are fearless; eager to jump from the diving board into the deep end on the very first day. Some cower back in fear for weeks; dipping a toe in; occasionally feeling bold enough to wet an ankle. Eventually though, they grow less fearful; sliding into on their own, letting go of the pool's edge, putting their faces in the water and moving their arms to paddle.

When their parents come to watch the final swim class of the season, it is absolutely the best day. The advanced children show off their backstroke across the length of the pool, while the newer learners bob for their parents and fetch rings from the pool floor. Dezzie's mom is in shock at how far her daughter has come, and the head lifeguard even approaches Cameron's mom to ask her if she'd consider having Cammy join the Y's swim team. My mother stands to the side smiling softly at their accomplishments; proud of all of her after-schoolers' confidence, and the way they tilt their heads back with limbs outstretched, spreading on the water's surface like stars staying afloat.

\* \* \*

During the fall semester of my last year at college, I was in bed roasting with the flu when my mother called. She wanted to update me on the progress of the children, and fill me in on all of the new kindergarteners she had admitted to Little Wise Child this year. Lying in bed buried under covers, I looked across the room to the wall. Bright construction paper cards, covered in misspelled well wishes and crayon-shaded planes, shone back at me. I had stuck them there at the beginning of the semester, the letters I had received while abroad, from the after-school kids. While I talked to my mom about the children and all I was missing, I realized that soon the after-schoolers would be beyond our grasp, flitting out into the universe in search of the things we have shown them. Already the third graders were studying for the big standardized tests that they would take in the early spring; a test that determines whether or not they are eligible to be scouted by better public and private schools. For most of them it could be a way out if their parents allow them to enroll in these schools, but most of them won't; sometimes they are frightened of the unknown, but more often than not many just don't see the value in taking an active role in pursuing better education. Some believe that all schools in the U.S. are the same, and that switching schools is an unnecessary nuisance because of the need to commute. Still, it is a chance; I pray every year that they all study hard so that they do their best.

Working at the program since the age of fourteen has taught me that these bright children scattered before us have no notion of time. Their nimble legs bound along, while their sharp minds take in all of the knowledge we have to give them, all of the experiences we'd like to share. They do not know that each day spent will push them

closer to an hour of decision; whether or not to move past their parents limitations to succeed, or lapse defeated onto poverty's concentric circles. We hold them now in this instant, a fragile moment of simplicity where what's best for them is clear. But once they leave us it is up to their parents; they are not ours to raise, and helping them bloom to their full potential would take many years. We've only been given weekday afternoons.

\* \* \*

When the school year ends, the final days of June unravel themselves slowly, shifting the feel of the air from coolness to one of heat. It means the summer camp season is approaching and with it, memories of past summers always resurface. I think of the kids often, their funny anecdotes bubbling up to dance along the edges of my thoughts from time to time. There's Dakota with her tanned cheeks and wide smile, tugging on the edge of my shorts so that she can show me her favorite new dance move, and Taelah sitting across from me legs folded as I taught her how to sign "Let It Go" in American Sign Language. I remember the July afternoon when Candice fell. It was the summer of 2009; my mother rented space from a large local church and for some reason there were weathered bricks inlaid in the ground by the church's back door. Candice sliced her knee open and white bone was exposed, but she didn't notice. She ran around with that hanging flap of skin, blood dotting cotton socks until I stopped her, shrieking. She didn't react even when she saw what the brick had done. Adrenaline is a powerful thing; it helped Jaydez run across the hard park gravel faster than he ever could have on his own to beat Hakeem in a foot race, it helped Annalise when she fell off of a horse and onto the dusty forest trail when he bucked up unexpectedly, and it stole Candice's pain that day as she sat by the church door bleeding into her shoes.

When you work with children you have to be calm. The art of scab treatment and hushing angry tears is an art form that I am now well versed in though it took me a couple of summers to learn. In many ways I have undergone my own evolution when it comes to coping along side the growth and change of Smart Alex. These campers are my children. The ones I coddle and fuss over. I know their families. I've spoken to the weary nurse mothers who pull double shifts on weekends, and the fathers, some of whom avoid picking up during Friday's dismissal; asking the mothers to collect children when the camp fees are due instead. We try to work with the parents who cannot afford the weekly camp fee, offering discount pricing, payment plans, and even free services for one camper if their family has more than two children in enrolled. The older siblings of current campers who used to attend Smart Alex themselves and the friendly cabbies who team up with parents to carpool for the kids without rides are the community mom has cobbled together. Each of us stems from that similar root, similar because of our tie to the country of Jamaica. We all make up the Smart Alex Summer Camp, and our lives have intertwined even more in many small ways. Although the camp has expanded over the years my mom's and my own goals remain the same. We follow the children closely hoping they will not falter, our breaths catching a little each time they fall. But they are always fine, laughing through wide smiles, clambering to their feet and continuing to play.

\* \* \*

A regular day at the camp begins with academic work, unless it's a trip day. For half an hour the children scratch away in workbooks. Some of them have summer packets from school and opt to work on those instead. Afterwards, the campers line up

with bottled water and a snack to head out for the morning activity. Each day is different; sometimes yoga is first up on the agenda, sometimes tennis. The campers trek to the nearby tennis courts or park with a partner. After their first activity, the children are allowed to play in the sprinkler on extremely hot days, before returning to the camp site. Following this outing, we have robotics and building before lunch. With the exception of trip days when they bring their own lunch, all campers eat a hot meal at noon. Lunch is generally followed by a resting period before the children break into smaller groups based on personal interest. Some choose to participate in dancing and ROTC drills while others play chess or sew. On certain days of the week the children participate in special activities like fencing, bike riding, and soccer. Tuesdays and Thursdays serve as trip days. The campers wear their camp t-shirts and partner up with either a friend or camp counselor. Most trips require us to take the train and the children love this; they kneel on the subway seats so they can look out of the windows, marveling as the loud bright bustle of Bronxite scenery becomes the dark snaking tunnels of Manhattan's subway system.

Cheyenne informed me last time we spoke that her "favorite trip ever", was the one we took to Build-a-Bear Workshop because she got to create Natalie, her brown pop-star bear. "And she's just so perfect!" she sighed, beaming up at me from her seat at the long rectangular table. "I dressed her up in a cute sparkly vest with pink boots and she looked awesome. She was just like Hannah Montana, but a little bit better!"

These are the silly little conversation that stick; the experiences that set their faces alight with happiness and allow them to be kids. During camp days, the schedule sets a rapid pace for both the children and the workers. Moving at such a speed can blur the

finer details you'd catch if you were moving slowly. However sometimes, the day comes to an abrupt halt as the reality of the world outside camp fun is unveiled.

One morning Jayden, a kindergartener with large dark eyes and a lisp, arrives at the summer camp in a ratty old t-shirt and frayed jean shorts. He runs up the sidewalk to the summer camp entrance, and pounds on the side door, eager to begin his day at camp. It's a trip day, and when I open the door to admit his bouncing energy, I notice that he has no backpack or food for the day. "Good morning Jayden, where's your mom?" I ask him, but he only shrugs up at me, his face splitting into a boyish grin. "Who dropped you off this morning?" "My mommy," he explains.

It has been like this since the first day of camp. His mother is constantly forgetting his swimwear, and never sends him to camp with lunch or money to purchase food. His is a young mother; about twenty-five or so, but her forgetfulness and the fact that it impacts Jayden, is what makes this recurrence truly upsetting. I usher Jayden inside and call my mom to find out what to do. The voice on the other end of the line is hushed and angry. She says she will contact his mother and handle it. Jayden looks up at me from his seat at the table where he is playing with blocks. I smile down at him, the phone pressed to my ear, trying not to let my heartache show. He is building a wooden tower. I kneel down and begin to help him, wishing his own mother would take the time to sit down with him and construct something beautiful and stable for him as well.

\* \* \*

Renee just got admitted to college. A tall slender child with skin the color of night time, who lived on Palmer Avenue for most of her life. She was one of our first after-schoolers and campers, and she's travelled so far. She was always so quiet during

her time in the program; doing her homework diligently, scrawling away in her perfect penmanship, writing, what she didn't know then, was her ticket out. Still her roots run back towards Jamaica, as do my mother's and as do mine. Something has tethered us, so that no matter how far we roam, we can always find our way back to the where all of it began. Renee and I, the Palmer girls, living five houses apart with similar dreams, found a way to becoming all that we are. She comes back to work with the program from time to time, helping to raise up the next group of kids; believing that they have the potential to be everything because she's done it herself. When the children see her, they know they can be anything; when I see her, I know that this work we do is worth something more than even I, who've been there from the start, can describe.

\* \* \*

There is something to be said for listening. The quiet moments are the ones that reach you, enveloping you with their warmth; a child confessing fears about being replaced by a new baby brother or the fast tears of a grandson for the grandmother he lost last week. Children speak in so many ways; through the tiny fingers slick with sweat that squeeze your hand as you help them, balance on roller skates for the first time, or the loopy smile that eases onto a little one's face after they learn how to sign their names in ASL without help. These quiet conversations become the gestures they show you to prove how much they care. They ask their parents to give you baked good on your birthday and bring you floral scented lotions for Christmas. They want your praise; phrases like "that's wonderful" and "good job!" inspire even the most timid camper to beam with pride. With all the things you cannot fix for them, there are a few you can. They want to know that you are listening; they want to know they can be heard.