

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform – Hearing
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William C. Kellibrew
Testimony

Our values and our beliefs drive our decision-making, actions, and behavior.

What we say, what we do, and how we behave can be directly linked to what we value and believe. But what if? What if what we value and believe was either lost, stolen, withheld from us, or even destroyed?

That is what happened to me in our family living room in Capitol Heights, MD on the morning of July 2, 1984, a date growing up, I had come to dread each year.

July 4th, a celebration of freedom and independence, had a different meaning for my brothers, sister, grandmother, and our entire family – one we would never forget.

For me, at age 10, the 4th meant loud noises, bangs, bombs, crackling sounds of firecrackers imitating gun fire.

I woke up on a hot and sunny Monday, July 2nd to my mom screaming outside of our home. I slowly got up from the bed to look out of our living room window. Apparently, I was the only one home.

I witnessed my mom, Jacqueline, and my 12-year-old-brother, Tony, being dragged down the street by my mom's ex-boyfriend. Mom was on the run following a 7-month torturous relationship.

After dragging them to our front door. Mom banged on the door. I opened. Mom burst in and ran to the window to yelling, “Call the police!” My brother stood against the wall with one foot glued to the floor.

He took out a black gun and loaded it – bullet by bullet. He wasted no time. He walked over to mom. She frantically turned to him. He pointed the gun at her face. She yelled as loud as she could yell, “No!” He pulled the trigger.

He then went to my brother, put the gun up to his head and pulled the trigger. He then walked over to me and squatted with the gun to my head.

I looked down the barrel and into his eyes and I begged, “Please don’t kill me, I will do anything.” as fast as I could say. He didn’t respond, so I looked up to the ceiling, held my hands tightly and I begged, “God, please don’t let him kill me, I will do anything.” An eternity passed. He stood and walked to the other side of the room.

After pacing, he said that I could leave. But, where was I going? This was our family living room.

With my little shorts and no shoes, I slowly exited our home and ran, yelling, “Call the police!”

A three-hour standoff. Two murders, one suicide. We never returned to that rental home again.

A loving family member, trying to make sense of it all, patted me on my shoulder and told me before the funeral, “Baby, you gonna have to forget about it.” My grandmother packed what photos she had, locked them in a black and gold chest, and we all tried to forget.

I took that strategy to the fifth grade trying to imagine a world much different than what I experienced.

Three years later in 7th grade, I could not bear the pain anymore. I woke up one morning and I put my book bag on and headed off to school. I stood on our neighborhood bridge on North Capitol street just 22 blocks away from my seat today, having decided to take William Kellibrew out of the equation.

That morning was void of my dignity, my voice, my soul, and my purpose – empty. I was one decision away from relief, but I made it to school.

My assistant principal, Mr. Charles C. Christian called my grandmother and I was hospitalized for 30 days. When I was discharged, I met my first-ever therapist, Christine Pierre. Instead of having the session in her office, she took me to the cafeteria at Children’s Hospital and asked me, “What do you want for lunch?” On a one-to-one, I said to myself, “I am gonna clean you out.”

I started at the ice cream machine and built the biggest ice cream cone on this side of earth.

No one had ever listened so intently to what I had to say. It was the beginning of my healing journey and my first introduction to the mental health system.

Thirty years later, I sit here reminded of the life-long journey of hope, healing, and resilience.

I stand today with a sense of purpose, dignity, and respect for the shoulders I stand on today and a sense that healing is possible.

Two professors from where I received my first degree, the University of the District of Columbia, started the William

Kellibrew Foundation in 2008. They recognized my passion for service and invested in supporting victims of crime and my career as a victim and survivor advocate.

Today, I have taken my passion to my role as the director for the Office of Youth and Trauma Services at the Baltimore City Health Department, where my mom was born in the 50's, I am afforded the opportunity to work alongside brilliant and dedicated colleagues and under the leadership of the city's health commissioner, Dr. Letitia Dzirasa, to continue to build a trauma-informed and responsive City of Baltimore at the forefront of a national violence, trauma, opioid and substance use epidemic claiming precious lives each day and year. We have trained over 3100 city employees, community members, small businesses and nonprofits in a trauma-informed approach and now working on ensuring the longer-term impact that applying metrics can bring.

In my role in Baltimore, we focus on an upstream public health approach that 1) realizes the prevalence of trauma, 2) recognizes and understands the role that trauma plays in the lives of those we serve and engage including our colleagues because this is not just about those people we serve, but all of us; 3) We are also responding by putting our knowledge into practice and 4) resisting re-traumatization in our homes, communities, and systems of care.

The journey for me, like so many families I engage in Baltimore, is not an easy journey of recovery. Our family has battled addiction, homelessness, type 1 and 2 diabetes, heart disease and other health implications, as a direct connection to our trauma. Trauma at its core is an individual experience, but we are all impacted in some way ourselves or those we care deeply about.

My grandmother who is sitting here today said to me as a little boy, "If you can handle your mom and brother's death, you can

handle anything.” I didn’t know what she meant by that at 10, 13, 15, and age 21, but I held on to her faith because I did not have much growing up. I had hoped that she knew what she was talking about. I met a young boy in Baltimore when I first started my job who had been shot in his head. He was around age 7. He told me his story, but what I took away was that while lying in the hospital fighting for his life, he said that he was trying to stay alive for his family.

Families cannot be left to grapple with the aftermath of trauma, we need sound support through leadership and governance, effective policies and practices, mental health and substance use supports and treatments, a knowledge-base in addressing trauma, and the caring and compassion that I know we are all capable of delivering.

Today, I do celebrate my birthday now, I celebrate the Fourth of July without jumping and running for cover, and I celebrate the fact, not opinion, that hope, Healing, recovery, and our future, is all possible for every one of us, especially our most vulnerable, our children, who are our most precious resource.

Trauma disrupts a sense of connection, control, and meaning. We must reconnect, be free advance our purpose, and bring meaning back to our lives. Trauma dehumanizes us. That is when we bring humanity back into those spaces.

Thank you to the Honorable Congressman Elijah Cummings and to the Honorable Congressional colleagues and staff of the House Oversight Committee. Distinguished you are, for bringing attention to trauma and how we can address it. Mostly though, for giving survivors voice and choice today.