



# News Release

## Office of Communications

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **‘Rainbow of Mothers’ Delivers Words of Wisdom at Inaugural Michael Brown Leadership, Social Justice Program**

WELLSTON, MO – “What do we do about police brutality?”

That question is a heavy one, but for Lezley McSpadden-Head, the question is complex, emotional, and extremely personal. McSpadden-Head is the mother of Michael Brown, the young man who was killed by a Ferguson police officer in 2014 and helped spark what is now known as the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement. A student posed the question to Brown’s mother during last month’s inaugural session of the Michael Brown Program for Social Justice and Leadership at Normandy High School, Brown’s alma mater.

McSpadden-Head paused and was noticeably affected by the question.

“It’s not easy; it’s very difficult because it becomes a trigger for you,” she reflected. “It’s a reminder that you didn’t get justice and you know how that mother and the family feels. I know what it feels like.”

McSpadden-Head was joined by her fellow ‘Rainbow of Mothers’ – Wanda Johnson, mother of Oscar Grant; and Marion Tolan, mother of police shooting survivor and activist (and former St. Louis Cardinal) Robbie Tolan -- to share their journeys and words of advice with the students. The women in the group have gone through the traumatic experience of losing a loved one, or having a loved one seriously injured, by police. The panel discussion was moderated by St. Louis native and best-selling author Lyah LeFlores-Ituen.

The timing of the program’s launch -- shortly after one of the most contentious election seasons in this nation’s history -- is intentional.

“Given what has happened and continues to happen in our communities -- the pandemic, and the rising tensions around racial justice -- our students need a lot of support and encouragement,” explained Nakia Douglas, principal at Normandy High School.

“Students want to process what happened and know ‘where do we go from here?’” said Isaiah Melendez, assistant principal at Normandy High School. “This will help create that space for them.”

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This session also featured messages from Dr. Sharonica Hardin-Bartley, superintendent of the School District of University City, and member of the Ferguson Commission; and Dr. Terry Harris, executive director of Student Services at Rockwood School District, and co-founder of The Collective STL, a health and wellness group.

Hardin-Bartley pressed the students to use their voices for change.

“Stay engaged and stay informed,” she said. “How are you going to plant yourself in your community and make a difference? You can use your voice to disrupt anything that is unjust. Put actions behind your words and work together to make your communities better. [Your voice] is a most powerful resource.”

The program is geared toward sophomores and will be held via Zoom.

This monthly program will focus on a variation of the theme ‘BE’, for example, BE Powerful, BE an Advocate, BE Courageous. For the November event, the focus was on wellness - BE Well. The theme for December is BE Inspired.

In addition to the guest speakers, the program also featured discussions with students on the recent presidential election and coping strategies for COVID-19. There were also performances by students, local musicians and video clips from topical movies and documentaries.

Students will also be challenged to do a legacy project in honor of Michael Brown, who was known to spend time in the music department. The project is to raise funds to build a recording studio in Brown’s honor. Students will also present a challenge to the community, encouraging residents and families to support upcoming school community service projects like a toy drive.

At the end of the session, students thanked the panel, guests and staff for putting the program together.

“[The program] is giving us inspiration,” said student Tianna Shelton. “With everything going on, we really appreciate it.”

CAPTION: Dr. Sharonica Hardin-Bartley, Superintendent, School District of University City

CAPTION #2: Lezley McSpadden-Head, mother of Michael Brown