

## Ex-offenders save next generation

By Roderick C. Willis  
AFRO NEWSPAPERS

BALTIMORE — Little Tim is only 7 years old, but is wise for his age. He has seen a lot of violence in his neighborhood, much of it ending in death. Tired of the killing and violence, Tim often marches with adults who mentor him and want to stop the violence and illegal drug trade that triggers much of the death and destruction.

His mentor, Ellsworth Johnson-Bey, is a strong and sometimes-controversial man who would like nothing better than to ensure that little Tim is never tempted by the lure of selling drugs. So Johnson-Bey and his organization offer Tim and other young people the opportunity to make money by selling a legal prod-

uct — bumper stickers that read "Unity or Die" — with 40 percent going to Tim and 60 percent going to an organization, Solvia Nation.

Johnson-Bey is part of a group of brave men and women who patrol some of the toughest drug markets in Baltimore. Their mission is to rescue drug dealers from a life of crime and encourage young dealers to adapt an alternative lifestyle.

"We cannot sit back and tell young people not to sell drugs and give them no opportunity to survive," said Johnson-Bey. "By encouraging this boy to do the right thing, and giving him an alternative to the profit in drug, we may have saved a life and built a future for him."

One would ordinarily have

grave reservations about such a task, because it can invite violence. Perhaps one reason Johnson-Bey and other members of the group are not afraid is because many of them led the same kind of life and are ex-offenders who are now giving back to the same communities they once terrorized.

Johnson-Bey wears another important hat in the community. He is founder and chief executive officer of an organization called F.O.X.O., the Fraternal Order of X-Offenders. This group recently held a symposium, in conjunction with the Mayor's Office of Children Youth and Families, to address the growing needs of those returning to the community after being incarcerated. The symposium was held at Sojourner Douglas College and attracted ex-offenders and community organizations that assist ex-offenders in transition.

"It is the ex-offender who is educating or mis-educating our young people," said Johnson-Bey. These are the individuals who are role models in many of our communities. They are the mother and fathers of many of our children. If we cannot engage the ex-offender to become a con-

structive force in the community, we will encounter him or her as a destructive force."

Statistics reveal that between 8,500 and 9,000 men and women are released from state and federal prisons each year in Maryland, with more than half returning to four zip codes in Baltimore. Many of these ex-offenders are in need of employment, housing, health care and other services.

Jamal Moses, executive director of the Mayor's Office of Children Youth and Families, offers support to ex-offenders and their families.

"This symposium is extremely important, as it helps us to identify the problems facing the ex-offender," said Moses. "The mayor's Office of Children Youth and Families is committed to giving assistance to those returning to the community and their families. We cannot, however, assume that we have all of the answers to all of the problems. We must listen to their concerns and meet people where they are. It is incumbent upon everyone who can help enable ex-offenders to become self-empowered, self-assertive and self-confident and effective productive citizens."

## Tuskegee Airmen older, but still fighting

By Travis Reed  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ORLANDO, Fla. — Even after 85 years of living, 1st Lt. Wilson Eagleson still remembers plenty. Not all the names, necessarily, but a lot of dates and details.

How it felt when shrapnel blew through his fighter plane and into his leg on a combat mission more than 60 years ago, and what it was like to be a second-class citizen as a black pilot in a segregated military during World War II.

But he also remembers the good things, and there are even more of them.

Eagleson is one of the few remaining members of the Tuskegee Airmen, an elite group of the smartest and toughest young black men in 1940s America, recruited for an "experiment" — to let them perform the same complicated and demanding job white people had been doing for decades. Many commanders didn't believe blacks had the intelligence or dexterity necessary to pilot, Eagleson said.

"Failure was not an option. If the experiment had failed, it would have proven their point," he said.

Eagleson joined about 80 airmen in Orlando this week for the group's 34th annual convention, a six-day gathering that unites the decorated soldiers with each other and younger black military pilots for a week of story-swapping business. Perhaps much more business than one might imagine for a yearly convention.

All five of the first class of airmen have died, and the remaining pilots are well into their 70s and 80s.

No one knows exactly how many Tuskegee Airmen are left, but military officials estimate about 200 of the 1,000 or so men who won their wings at the Alabama air base are still alive — besides countless aircraft maintenance men and other ground crew workers who helped forge the group's proud history.

The men know they aren't going to live forever, and convention attendance has steadily dropped each year as more airmen succumb to age or illness. However, they're doing what they can in the meantime to preserve the airmen's proud history, like offering scholarships to youths interested in aviation and speaking to young urban blacks about a job that changed their lives — and the course of history. Many have taped interviews and written books to document their extraordinary lives, though some airmen have left the war in their past.

"They don't see themselves as heroes. They simply did what needed to be done," said retired Col. Len Nevels, who heads the committee that organized the convention. "Because these guys are so modest about what they did, a lot of people don't even acknowledge it."

They were chosen — some without even knowing it — because they scored well on military tests, and most had already taken at least a few years of college. They were kids — 18, 19, 20 — given poor equipment and the most dangerous bomber protection assignments by prejudiced overseas commanders. And they built a proud, storied squadron that ran circles around other crews above Europe in shiny gray planes with red tails.

The airmen never lost a plane under escort to enemy fighters, a sterling record that quickly made them popular with the bomber pilots. The group developed such a reputation that some German pilots stopped pursuing American planes they knew would be escorted by the scrappy airmen.

Now all these years later their faces are lined with age, their voices slightly weaker. But America's first black fighter pilots remain humble and proud of their decorated past — Eagleson has two Purple Hearts — and the brotherhood they share as airmen.

Some turned out to be career servicemen despite continued discrimination, but plenty others went into business or got law degrees after the war ended in 1945. Many of them are and were links in a chain of educated black families that excelled despite tall obstacles.

The airmen want the same for generations to follow, and focus on talking with kids in schools and offering airplane rides to get them interested. They also meet with young, wide-eyed black pilots who fly the military's planes today — a proud sight for any old soldier.

If asked, the airmen will talk about the racism and bigotry, and how no one thought they were worth anything before they proved they could fly a plane or pack a parachute. Instead, the accidental celebrities count blessings for what they've got — and changed.

Eagleson was one of the officers who closed the Tuskegee base after President Truman signed the equal rights act in 1948, returning to the place where he met a bunch of other young, black, overachieving men who would become lifelong friends.

## Health screenings for Hawkins defense fund

The Reginald A. Hawkins Pioneer Legal Defense Fund, N.C. NAACP and Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation will host the Health Carousel of the Carolinas Saturday at Grady Cole Center. The Mecklenburg County Health Department and other local health and social services organizations will provide screenings, information and referral services from 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

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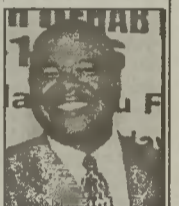
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