

Memories about Harambee

This year, Harambee celebrates 25 years. Over the years, more than 1,000 young people have participated in the Office of African American Ministries' Harambee youth program. Some have wandered away from Catholicism, but three women have remained connected in the Archdiocese of Baltimore through friendship and ministry in the church.

Torena (Francis) Brown, Tracie Jiggets and Sherita Thomas met at a Harambee retreat more than 20 years ago and remained friends.

Harambee as a beacon of Christ's teachings is geared to the youth in the city. The organization provides a spiritual, social, educational and, at times, a cultural experience for youths growing to serve Christ.

"It was there, that you learned your place in the church," said Brown.

Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Sister Gwynette Proctor founded Harambee. Howard Roberts, the current coordinator of the organization, saw the need to contact youths across the city to build upon their faith in Catholicism and prepare them for life.

"Mr. Roberts is like an uncle," Thomas noted. "He remained connected and sought to keep us involved."

Harambee youth ministers throughout the city were able to add Harambee's activities to their annual calendar.

Harambee also provided a networking system for young people, who believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ and have a sense of belonging to the church.

Brown, Jiggets and Thomas have continued to network through the years. They have celebrated each other's gifts, service to the community, as well as marriages and other family ceremonies. They freely call on each other when needed, to provide support, expertise and assistance. The programming provided by Harambee helped these women in their communities and careers. The annual retreat and subsequent

workshops provided skill development in leadership, which they have incorporated in their careers and community service.

As a youth, Brown often led programs and would return home during college breaks to assist with the annual retreat. Currently, she is a science and math teacher at St. Frances Academy. She also serves as the student activities coordinator, NSBE Jr. (National Society of Black Engineers) coordinator and junior class moderator. In addition, Brown is active in several ministries at St. Cecilia Church, such as the dance ministry, GENISIC choir and the adult services ministry. Brown is married to Darrell Brown, and they have two children - Jordan, 12, and Dalen, 8 months.

As a talented dancer, instructor, choreographer and ambassador for the arts, Jiggets works at the Eubie Blake Jazz Institute and Cultural Center. Harambee helped her shape her gift, and she danced her way into the hearts of Harambee youths and leaders when liturgical dancing became an exceptional expression of worship in the early '90s. Jiggets holds various positions connected to her faith in Christ and passion for dance. She is the dance program director for New David Baptist Church, dance director of HappyFeet at St. Ambrose, Baltimore, and program director for Eubie Blake Center's Summer Arts Program. She is also the founder of Baltimore Black Arts and holds a monthly networking session for local and aspiring actors to sharpen their skills at the Actors Playground held at the Eubie Blake Center. Jiggets is a dancing member of St. Ambrose.

Harambee provided Thomas the time to develop her gift of leadership and management. As a supervisor at T. Rowe Price and a member of various boards, she enjoys coaching and developing people, as well as event planning. For her community service efforts on a Baltimore City HeadStart board, Thomas was awarded the Merit Award from T. Rowe Price. She received the Mother Lange award for her service at St. Edward's Church. She has served on the Parish Council and Liturgy Committee, as well as taught Sunday school. In addition, she has assisted with the altar server and youth activities. While pursuing her undergraduate degree, Thomas would return home to assist with Harambee programming on her summer and winter breaks. She is married to Gerrod Thomas and has one child: Amani, 9 months old.

“Harambee allowed me to meet people my age across the city of Baltimore who believed in Christ,” Thomas said.

Sherita Thomas is a parishioner of St. Edward, and Torena Brown is a parishioner of St. Cecilia in Baltimore.