

# Tough love: Young men call St. Frances Academy home, literally

**By Erik Zygmunt**

*ezygmunt@CatholicReview.org*

Twitter: @ReviewErik

"I'm a father figure," said Danaz Williams, describing his role as assistant director of the St. Frances Academy Residential Life Program.

All his interventions with the young men under his care – a stern word, a quiet word or a bear hug – point to a trust that could only be established through that indispensable role.

"To tell you the truth, I'd be in trouble," said senior Tyquan Wilson, wondering aloud where he would be if not at the Father Joubert House at St. Frances Academy in Baltimore, which has served predominantly African-American students since 1828.

Wilson, who lives with 15 other young men from unstable situations, did not invoke "truth" lightly. Involved with "the system" – "My mother was going through some things; I was going through some things. I was led to the streets," he said – it took Williams' intercession to get him back on track.

"Every time I had to meet with my case manager, Coach Danaz was there," Wilson said.

That applied whether he was in the residential life program or "released" from it, as he was between his sophomore and senior years.

"We have a saying," said the Rev. Gina Dorsey, director of the program and a nondenominational Christian leader. "Once a Father Joubert, always a Father Joubert."

Living on the edge of campus in two interconnected row houses on Brentwood Avenue, less than a block north of the Baltimore City Detention Center, Wilson and his brothers – they refer to each other as such – study, compete on sports teams, work out and go on outings, all together.

"I think we have fun," said Jahid Davis, a heavily-built foil to Wilson and, as an avid talker, the de facto spokesman for the group. "Everybody has their different personalities – yeah, it's fun."

It's more than that.

"They truly are their brothers' keepers," Williams said. "They're pulling for each other and making sure they get to that next level. They'll tell you in a minute – 'Look, you're going to fail; you need to get it together.' "



*Gerard Mungo, a sophomore at St. Frances Academy, is a resident of the Father Joubert House at the East Baltimore school. (Kevin J. Parks/CR Staff)*

When necessary, they intercede for each other. Wilson said it was Davis – they lived a block apart – who helped get him back into the program after he had essentially been expelled.

“He has always been there for me,” Wilson said. “He would go and talk to Rev. Dorsey and Coach Danaz.”

Seeing his friend go to bat for him put things in perspective.

“Once I started to take that in, I was calmer,” he said. “I could listen to my mother more, to Coach Danaz more.”

It seems that everyone wants these young men to succeed.

“I can go to the store,” Davis said, “and if I see somebody that knows me, they tell me, ‘Why are you here? You need to stay there.’ ”

Williams emphasized that the young men’s unstable situations didn’t come from a lack of love.

“We’re not knocking what their parents are trying to do,” he said. “Maybe their mother was staying with a cousin, and she didn’t have her name on the lease.”

“Some of the young men were living in the dark because their electricity was shut off; some were dealing with evictions and other financial situations,” added Dorsey.

“Some, their families just want them to have more.”

*Video follows; story continues below*

There are weekly meetings with residents’ families, she said.

“It’s a mixture of parents, guardians and family members with these young men,” she said. “We are their guardians when they’re here, but we don’t cut the parents out of anything.”

According to the young men, it’s impossible to cut Rev. Dorsey out of anything.

“You know how your mother knows what you’re going to do before you do it?” Davis asked. “She’s our mother.”

As they come to realize, her tough love pays dividends.

“They come back, hug my neck and say, ‘I appreciate you,’ ” Rev. Dorsey said.

### **Practical roots**

The St. Frances Academy Residential Life Program was launched in 2011. Deacon B. Curtis Turner, principal of St. Frances, was giving a tour to philanthropist Robert C. Embry Jr., president of the Abell Foundation, when a student had an emotional meltdown, in front of the two men.

"I said, 'If that kid grew up in my house or my mother's house, he'd be fine,' " Deacon Turner remembered. "Bob looked at me and said, 'Let's make it happen.' " Residents come to the program through word of mouth and other paths. Williams met one young man who was on campus while his cousin was trying out for the Panthers' football team.

"This young man was just sitting on the hill, and I went up and asked, 'What's your story?' " Williams, also a football assistant coach, recalled. "Something drew me to him."

He found out that the teenager had been stabbed and shot in the recent past, and his mother suffered from addiction.

"For almost a whole school year, he stayed in one location in his house and didn't move," Williams recalled of the young man, who is now moving forward at the Father Joubert House.

"They come in with a lot of issues - trouble with the law, terrible attitude problems, no school in a long time and serious trust issues," Dorsey said.

She recalled another young man who came in as a junior, after having been out of school altogether for months. His mother had died, and he had been looking after his sister.

"He fought us in the beginning; he wanted to leave," Dorsey said. "Now he's in college in New Jersey."

It was no fluke.

"The ones that fight us the most are the ones who end up being the most successful," she observed.

Like much that is worthwhile, the process is never easy for either educators or students.

"God gives me the energy to do it every day," Williams said. "We get too caught up in what we need to do in life, rather than how we can help other people."

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