'She's trying to help hundreds of people': Faith inspires advocate in her fight for the underserved

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Keisha Cummings sits nervously in an office lobby at the Henrico County courthouse complex, waiting to speak to prosecutor Sean Breit-Rupe. She doesn’t have an appointment.

One of her former students — a 22-year-old — is facing up to life in prison for robbery. He deserves a chance, she says of the man, who has a son with special needs.

“He is not like somebody who’s going out there to hurt anybody,” she tells Breit-Rupe when they step into a courthouse hallway to talk, handing him a booklet and proposing an alternative sentence: a program that trains people for construction work and pays $18 per hour.

“I’ll certainly take a look at it,” says Breit-Rupe, telling Cummings that he, too, wants a just resolution to the case. “It’s not about just locking everybody up,” he says. Still, the victim in the robbery suffered a severe injury.

After the meeting, Cummings, 41, stands outside the courthouse and worries.

If he is locked away with a heavy prison sentence, “it’s another Black boy out there without a father.”

Cummings has always seen the glaring inequalities and refuses to accept them. As a child growing up in Philadelphia, as a school-based mental health provider and as a teacher, Cummings has been watching as Black teenagers and young men struggle to survive in a system that leaves many destined for either jail or the cemetery. After spending years working within the system in schools and seeing few changes, she is trying to plug gaps on her own.

“She has a special skill set for communicating with diverse groups of people, and that goes from people who sit in boardrooms to people who sit in jail cells,” said 5th District City Councilwoman Stephanie Lynch, a friend of Cummings. “She has that earnest heart and that honest intention. She’s a true down-and-dirty social worker.”

Behind all of Cummings’ efforts is a strong belief that God is using her to mitigate the suffering of people who are born without a fair chance. Even as she is so invested in trying to make Richmond a better place, she is troubled by its dark history of oppression as the former capital of the Confederacy. She says she’ll stay here until she finishes the work she is called to do.

For now, the single mother and Manchester resident spends her days taking on systemic problems as varied as food insecurity, gun violence, and racial inequalities in education and the criminal justice system — problems with no short-term solutions.

In the city of Richmond this year, 49 people have been killed, a 36% increase over the same period last year. Those numbers include some deaths that Richmond police don’t record in their homicide statistics, including self-defense killings. Nonfatal shootings have increased by about 11%, mirroring increases in gun violence in cities nationwide.

Cummings brings food and produce to families in under-resourced neighborhoods and trains residents of those communities to eventually take over, giving them agency over relief efforts in their neighborhoods. She also sits on the city’s Gun Violence Prevention Framework work group and served on the Task Force on Reimagining Public Safety, urging people in power to change policies that are stacked against those who live in poverty.

“I see the cycle,” says Cummings, who also does some consulting work. “We’ve got to put a stop to it.”

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**She pauses in** the parking lot of her next stop, Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center, to check on a young man she considers to be like a son. He has been in a coma for eight days from an overdose after someone laced his blunt with methamphetamine, she said.

Tears came as she sat in her blue Nissan Rogue and listened to “Yes,” a spiritual song by Shekinah Glory Ministry. Two years ago, she had been trapped in a painful relationship that tested her faith. She had stopped going to church and struggled heavily with anxiety, depression and alcohol use.

On this day, God was moving through her, she recalled later, hours after she walked from her car into Memorial Regional.

Moments after she enters the man’s hospital room, he suddenly starts moving and his oxygen levels start to rise. He starts waking up, trying to take tubes out and vomiting. She holds hands with the man’s girlfriend and several others, and they pray. A few weeks later, he is still in the hospital but can walk and talk.

“It really is God using me,” she says later that evening, recalling the experience.

Cummings sees herself as simply fulfilling God’s mission for her, to love. That love is what keeps her going.

“When you are talking to a 15-year-old and when you have intimate conversations with them, and then the next day you found out he got shot in the head, you’ve got to have a higher power,” Cummings says.

She calls the young men she tries to help her “sons” or her “babies.” Last summer, she was attending a funeral repast for one of these young men, a former student who had been killed by gun violence, when she and the other attendees came under gunfire. She dropped to the floor in terror, thinking about getting home safely to her own children, who are now ages 5 and 18.

Soon after that traumatizing experience, she asked God: “What do you want me to do? I can’t do this anymore.”

She believes she received an answer that same day, when two people she hadn’t spoken with in a long time called and asked her to help them find jobs. That was God’s way of telling her it was too soon to stop, she said.

On the day of the shooting incident, after she left the repast, she called a couple of her “babies” who had been at the funeral gathering to check on them. One of the young men told her that, yeah, he was doing all right. He didn’t seem shaken up by the gunfire.

“Miss Keisha, it’s OK,” he said. “We’re used to that.”

“I know,” she said, “and I’m sorry.”

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**Keisha Cummings’** parents split up when she was young, but she said her father’s “spiritual DNA” was passed on to her.

In her early childhood in Philadelphia, Cummings spent much of her time at the home of her best friend, Christina Thomas. They were like sisters.

They were tomboys and when they were 6 or 7 years old, they would race the boys in the neighborhood and “demolish them,” Thomas said.

Cummings started running track when she was 7, which kept her disciplined and focused and ultimately led to a full scholarship at the University of Connecticut. Her best event was the 800-meter race.

In college, Cummings initially wanted to be a defense attorney.

“I always took up for people,” she said. “I always had a mouth. I always would debate.”

She ended up majoring in human development and family studies.

Thomas said Cummings sometimes displays a tough exterior, but that her core is one of compassion, love and kindness.

“She just sees the good in everyone,” Thomas said. “Keisha recognizes that there’s an unequal distribution of resources, and she wants to bring change to that.”

Cummings first moved to Richmond in 2003 and later worked for the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority for about eight years as a qualified mental health professional at several city schools.

“If she saw a kid who needs clothes, she would go out and buy clothes and try to give them to kids,” recalled Derman Spragg, her former supervisor when they worked for RBHA at Blackwell Elementary. “If Keisha saw a need, she was going to try to help.”

Spragg introduced Cummings to the church she now attends twice a week, Mount Gilead Full Gospel International Ministries in Chesterfield County. He said he prays for her and texts her every day, noting that her volunteer work takes her to areas that see violence.

“She just loves those kids,” Spragg said. “We need people like that in the community.”

After working for RBHA, Cummings taught high school students for three years at Spartan Academy, the city’s alternative school for children with behavior challenges.

Now, as a community advocate, Cummings helps boys and young men with practical things, like finding them jobs or restoring their voting rights. She attends funerals when young people die violently, which takes a heavy emotional toll on her, and she supports people in neighborhoods that have been hit hard by gun violence, helping residents get counseling and other services.

Councilwoman Lynch said she was inspired by the work Cummings and others have been doing to support residents of The Belt Atlantic apartments in South Richmond. In April, a woman and her infant daughter were killed and three other bystanders were wounded in a daylight shooting. Police believe more than 50 shots were fired from at least three weapons, including an assault rifle.

“Sometimes we just cry together and yell because there is so much work to be done,” Lynch said. “She’s trying to help hundreds of people at a time, and there needs to be funding for that.”

Locally, the violence has taken the lives of young men Cummings has known for years.

Her mother visited her daughter in June and noticed how upset she was because a man she knew had been killed.

“She’s a very loving, caring person,” said Denise Cummings, who lives in Philadelphia. “She talks about the children down there a lot. She worries about them.”

Denise Cummings remembers when her daughter was a teenager and she gave a man a blanket on a cold day in Philadelphia. Another time, when the mother and daughter were at a restaurant, Keisha walked outside and gave her plate of food to a woman who looked hungry.

Keisha Cummings’ father, the late Harvey Cummings, had worked for the Philadelphia Department of Recreation and oversaw the city’s vast summer food program for children.

Carol Rice had been Harvey Cummings’ boss when she was deputy commissioner of the department. She spoke recently to Keisha.

“I can tell in talking with her, her father had a big influence on her, and he was determined to make sure that this program reached the people in the community — the kids in the community,” Rice said. “In talking with her, she reminded me a lot of her father. He just wanted to do good.”

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**On a Thursday** evening in June, Cummings is a whirlwind of energy as she and other volunteers gather boxes of food and household supplies in a Richmond warehouse to deliver to 15 families, most of them in Gilpin Court.

In spring of 2020, at the start of the pandemic, Cummings started delivering food and other essentials to people in need in Gilpin Court. She has been making the deliveries about every week since then, packing the boxes on Wednesdays and delivering them on Thursdays. She partners with volunteers and Mutual Aid, an organization that provides food and other supplies for the deliveries.

After surviving the gunfire that erupted at the funeral repast, Cummings’ perspective changed and so did the focus of her outreach efforts. She started putting more emphasis on empowering people within their communities.

To this end, Cummings started delivering food in one neighborhood and then training a resident of that community to take the reins so Cummings can move to another neighborhood and do the same thing.

In Richmond, many of the people Cummings is helping live in the city’s public housing communities, areas with higher concentrations of violent crime where the average household income is $11,145 per year, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Last year in central Virginia, about 182,220 people experienced food insecurity, nearly 12% of the population. Statewide, 41% of Virginians who are food insecure are Black, even though the percentage of Black residents statewide is about 20%.

Teenora Thurston, who has lived in Gilpin Court for a dozen years, started helping Cummings deliver food last year, and people felt more comfortable asking her for what they needed because she is their neighbor.

Thurston, who serves on a task force to create a civilian review board of policing practices in Richmond, had been a recipient of food deliveries for her family. Cummings helped find Thurston training to help her work through her childhood trauma.

Cummings is putting her full support behind Thurston and plans to turn over to her the food deliveries in Gilpin Court.

“To have someone in your corner and having your back, it was a blessing,” said Thurston, in tears.

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**Across the river** in South Side, Cummings is duplicating what she has done in Gilpin Court and empowering residents on Ruffin Road, where she delivers food and supplies to several young men who distribute them to their neighbors who need them.

On a recent afternoon, Cummings brings packages of essentials to 20-year-old DeAndre Broidy and a couple of his friends so they can deliver them in their neighborhood.

Broidy was one of Cummings’ former students at Richmond’s alternative school, the Spartan Academy.

Having a teacher who cared about him, he said, made him less likely to act out.

“She had the majority of everybody that was misbehaving,” he said. “With her, it was like how can you misbehave with someone who’s not treating you a certain type of way? She’s helping you with what you need.”

He said Cummings seemed to attract “all the bad kids” at the alternative school.

“Y’all aren’t bad kids,” says Cummings, correcting him. “You just make bad choices.”

“We make bad choices,” he agreed.

In Virginia’s schools, Black students make up more than half of school suspensions and accounted for more than 90% of Richmond’s long-term suspensions over a five-year period ending last November. Likewise, a disproportionate number of Black people are in Virginia’s juvenile justice system and incarcerated in adult prisons.

Most of the kids Cummings works with tell her that they would have stayed in school if they were learning things that would help them make a living in real life. Learning about art history, she said, isn’t going to lift them out of poverty.

Even though Ruffin Road has been Broidy’s home for seven years, he said he spent much of the time from ages 12 to 18 incarcerated in juvenile detention.

Growing up, his mom tried her best, Broidy said, but he often didn’t have enough food in his stomach. Now, he helps his neighbors.

“The kids will tell me they’re hungry sometimes,” he said. “I know most of the people who live here. They don’t see a random person, they see a person who be out here every day giving it to them so they don’t feel no kind of way. It’s a pride thing.”

Cummings hopes Broidy will eventually take over food deliveries and other services for his neighbors on Ruffin Road and then Cummings will train someone else to take the lead in another neighborhood. She said she needs funding to pay people like Broidy who are serving their neighborhoods.

In 2020, Cummings started 2Love LLC, a for-profit social enterprise that empowers communities to put on their own events and helps with relief efforts at the grassroots level.

She said the nonprofit groups that do work in Richmond have good intentions and provide neighborhoods with what they think the residents need.

“2Love goes into the community and empowers that community to see what they need themselves, and gives them the ability to do it for themselves,” she said.

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**Early on Monday** morning, Cummings sat quietly on a dock in Rocketts Landing along the Virginia Capital Trail, leaning back on her palms with her purple Nikes hanging over the water.

She feels the morning breeze, watches the birds and wonders aloud which way the current is flowing. This is where she goes most mornings to connect with God and be still.

At the moment, she is thinking of going somewhere like Montana or Wyoming, where the sky is clearer and she could see stars better.

“I want to go somewhere like that and lie down the whole day and just be quiet,” she says, wondering how some people can see something as beautiful as the Milky Way and not believe God can do anything.

A short while earlier, walking along the Capital Trail, she stopped to look at her “dream house” overlooking the water. She passes gardens and stops to gently touch an elephant ear plant. “This is all God,” she says.

A woman walks by wearing a Penn State sweatshirt, and Cummings strikes up a conversation. The woman tells Cummings a story about her daughter. When the subject of Richmond comes up, Cummings tells her that she’s ready to go somewhere else.

“When I finish my assignment, I’m gonna go,” Cummings says.

The two women embrace. “Some people you just connect with,” the woman tells Cummings.

A little later, Cummings explains that she will stay in Richmond as long as God calls her to do so, but she eventually wants to move from the city that was a hub of the slave trade.

“It’s the womb of the oppression — it’s the birthplace,” she said of Richmond. “It’s like two different worlds here, and people don’t know about each other.

“I want God to release me so I have a husband to serve,” she adds. “My husband’s not in Richmond.”

Until it’s time for her to move on, she will keep connecting people and fighting for Richmond’s underserved population.

Having survived her past traumatic relationship, she now understands her own strength. She doesn’t bite her tongue anymore when telling people in power that things need to change.

“I’m just finding out who I am,” she says. “I’m on a mission. I don’t think my mission is going to stop. I’m always going to be in service the rest of my life. I’m here in Richmond to do something.”

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