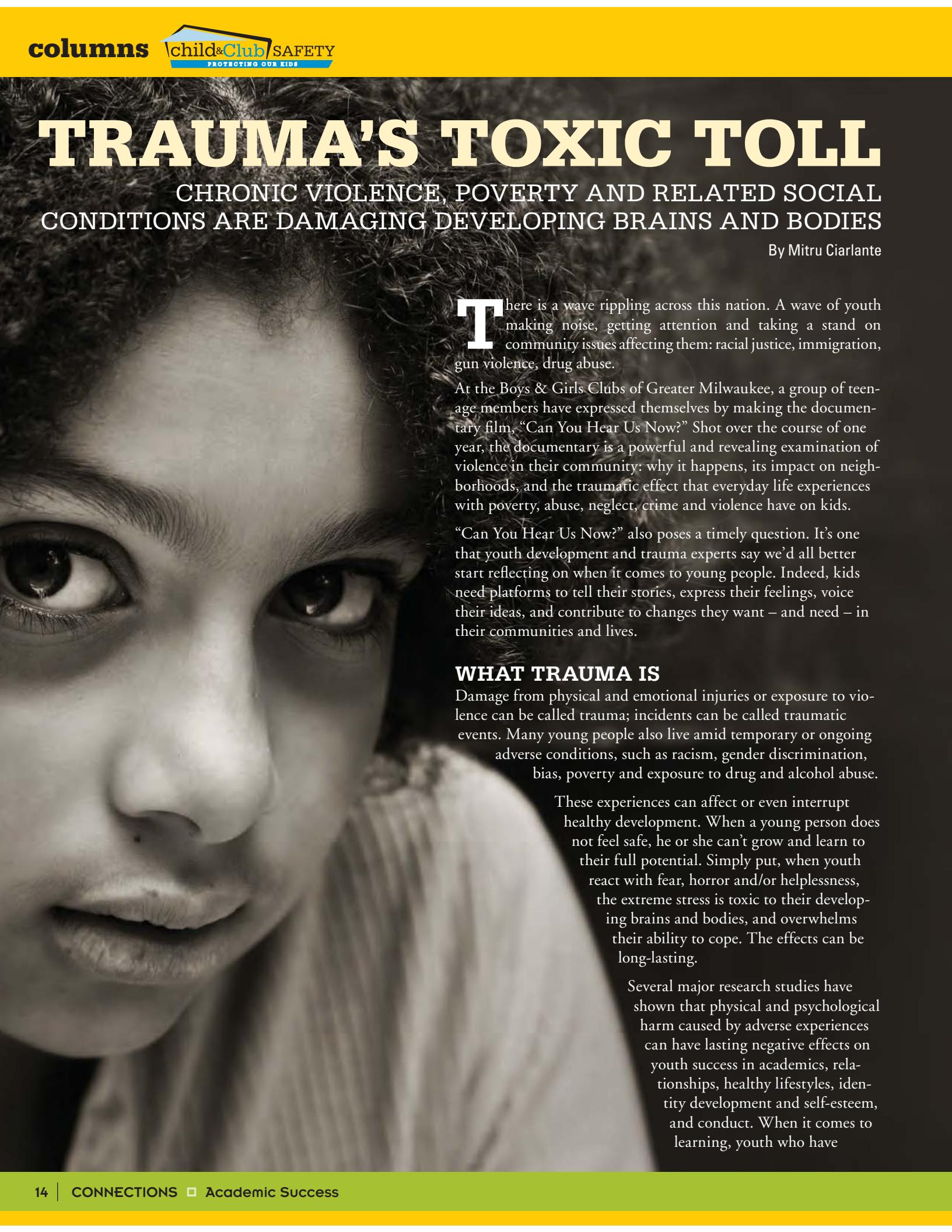


TRAUMA'S TOXIC TOLL

CHRONIC VIOLENCE, POVERTY AND RELATED SOCIAL CONDITIONS ARE DAMAGING DEVELOPING BRAINS AND BODIES

By Mitru Ciarlante



There is a wave rippling across this nation. A wave of youth making noise, getting attention and taking a stand on community issues affecting them: racial justice, immigration, gun violence, drug abuse.

At the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, a group of teenage members have expressed themselves by making the documentary film, "Can You Hear Us Now?" Shot over the course of one year, the documentary is a powerful and revealing examination of violence in their community: why it happens, its impact on neighborhoods, and the traumatic effect that everyday life experiences with poverty, abuse, neglect, crime and violence have on kids.

"Can You Hear Us Now?" also poses a timely question. It's one that youth development and trauma experts say we'd all better start reflecting on when it comes to young people. Indeed, kids need platforms to tell their stories, express their feelings, voice their ideas, and contribute to changes they want – and need – in their communities and lives.

WHAT TRAUMA IS

Damage from physical and emotional injuries or exposure to violence can be called trauma; incidents can be called traumatic events. Many young people also live amid temporary or ongoing adverse conditions, such as racism, gender discrimination, bias, poverty and exposure to drug and alcohol abuse.

These experiences can affect or even interrupt healthy development. When a young person does not feel safe, he or she can't grow and learn to their full potential. Simply put, when youth react with fear, horror and/or helplessness, the extreme stress is toxic to their developing brains and bodies, and overwhelms their ability to cope. The effects can be long-lasting.

Several major research studies have shown that physical and psychological harm caused by adverse experiences can have lasting negative effects on youth success in academics, relationships, healthy lifestyles, identity development and self-esteem, and conduct. When it comes to learning, youth who have

exposure to violence have been shown to have lower grade point averages, more negative remarks in their cumulative records, and more reported absences from school. They may also have increased difficulty concentrating and learning at school. These findings heighten the importance of providing safe out-of-school-time settings, which offer youth sanctuary, respite and a place to build resilience.

To overcome adverse experiences and conditions, young people need hope. And hope is generated when youth are empowered to take positive action to improve their lives and communities. It's what we do at Boys & Girls Clubs. We help kids build confidence, establish high expectations, and let them know that we can see their strengths and true, core selves – rather than judge them only on visible behaviors. These are some of the elements of trauma-informed youth settings, a framework for working with youth in ways that facilitate their support, recovery and resiliency after exposure to adverse experiences and trauma.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CLUBS

A trauma-informed child- and family-service system is one that recognizes and responds to the impact of traumatic stress on children, caregivers and staff. Trauma awareness is built-in across knowledge and skill development, organizational culture, practices and policies. Staff work collaboratively to facilitate and support the recovery and resiliency of traumatized youth and families.

Boys & Girls Clubs in Albany, N.Y., Boston, Chicago, Buffalo, N.Y., Kalamazoo, Mich., Tarpon Springs, Fla., Warwick, R.I. and many other communities have integrated trauma-informed practices to provide youth with relevant and meaningful programs and approaches that take into account their lived experiences.

At the Boys & Girls Clubs of Chicago, Director of Program Impact and Outcomes Keisha Farmer-Smith, Ph. D., trains staff members to approach problem behaviors from the perspective of, "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you?"

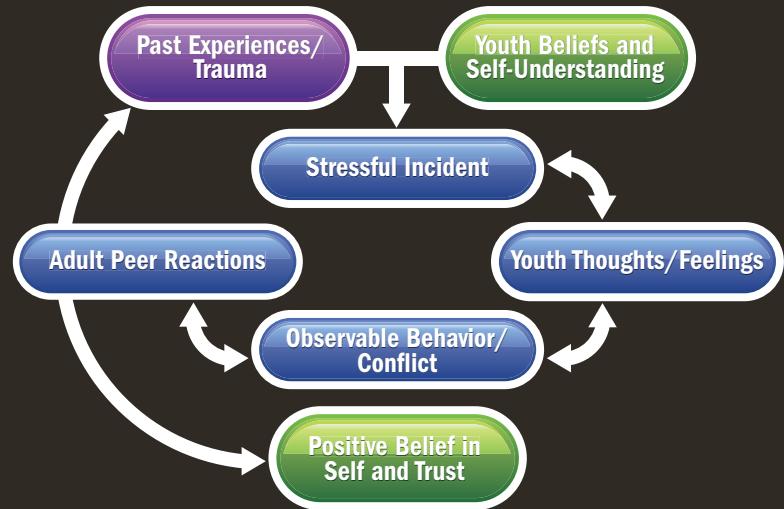
"Staff use the 'conflict cycle' (*see graphic*) as a tool for understanding and repairing incidents that disrupt the Club environment," said Farmer-Smith. "In this non-blaming approach, we work together to get at the root causes of disruption for the involved and affected youth. This enables us to repair the immediate situation, deescalate a problem and mend relationships. It also creates an opportunity to identify and provide support for past traumatic or difficult experiences that may be affecting [their] emotions and behaviors."

It is critical that we really listen to our young people. When we see youth for who they really are, rather than the behaviors they may display to hide their pain, they rise to be their best selves.

Sessions on child trauma topics will be offered during the 2015 BGCA Regional Leadership Conferences. You can also visit the website of BGCA partner The National Child Traumatic Stress Network at NCTSN.org for free resources and training opportunities.

Mitru Ciarlante is a director within BGCA's Child & Club Safety Department.

THE CONFLICT CYCLE



"CAN YOU HEAR US NOW?"

Watch the long-form trailer for "Can You Hear Us Now?" at BoysGirlsClubs.org/Leadership/Can-You-Hear-Us-Now.aspx or scan the QR code below.

