

Former NCC Youth Earns Doctorate Degree, Impacts Community



Dr. Shannon Stanford received her EdD in Organizational Change and Leadership May 11 from the University of Southern California.

Dr. Shannon Stanford is a true success story. Born and raised in the Central Ward of Newark, Stanford witnessed the effects of gun violence and drugs on her community. But New Community Corporation programs helped her see people working in a positive environment, which she attributes to her educational and professional achievements. She has been a professional teacher and currently works as a behavioral specialist and a consultant. Last month she completed her doctorate in education at the University of Southern California - all at age 32.

“I and others like myself are an example of the desired outcome of the NCC founders,” Stanford said. “We are examples of the good that results from people who assume social responsibility and believe that they can create a better world.”

Stanford was born at Columbus Hospital in Newark and moved into NCC Homes Court, which was an apartment building at 270 Morris Ave., when she was 4 years old.

“As a young child, for most of us living there, we witnessed the death of our friends maybe once or twice a year,” Stanford said.

Although there were issues with violence and drugs, Stanford said the community was very tight knit, like a family. She said even after people moved out, they kept in contact.

“It was the dichotomy of darkness and still all the possibility of light and love because people were dependent on each other,” she said.

For Stanford, NCC programs offered a source of light. From age 12 to 17 she went through Stars Of Urban Life (SOUL), an entrepreneurial youth performing arts program. Students in middle and high school created plays, wrote stories and worked with choreographers from places like East Orange and New York to learn how to put on major productions. She said they performed at NCC’s Neighborhood Center and traveled throughout New Jersey and to other states.

Rodney Gilbert was the director of SOUL when Stanford was in the program. He said she was one of the leaders, serving as a role model for the group.

“She was focused. No matter what was going on in the community, she was dedicated to performing,” he said.

Stanford also went through the Newark Youth Leadership Project (NYLP). Every summer for three years she worked with children who lived in NCC Harmony House, a transitional housing facility for families, and got paid for it. She served as a peer mentor for the children, going on trips and playing games with them as part of summer camp.

Another part of NYLP was exposing youth to a variety of people. Stanford credits the exposure with helping her stay on the right path.

“I think that had a major influence on me and my ability to dream outside of my environment. Unfortunately I lived in a place that had been overcome with violence. The program allowed me to see past that,” she said. “I was exposed to people doing positive things and people outside of the area where I was raised.”

Stanford says her experiences in NCC programs helped her do well in school. After graduating from Newark’s University High School in 2002, she attended Temple University in Philadelphia where she studied English and education.

She chose to study education to make a difference in young people’s lives. “I wanted to pay it forward in a way that many of the people who I met in the program had done for me,” she said. “I wanted to pass that along



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and create opportunities for young people.”

Upon completing her undergraduate degree in 2006, Stanford worked as a teacher at two different public charter schools in Philadelphia for about eight years.

While working as a teacher, Stanford earned a master’s degree in multicultural education from Eastern University in St. Davids, Pa. She graduated from that program in 2008.

She developed a future scholars arts program for Rutgers University in Newark from 2008 to 2010 to allow high school students to explore their identity through integration of the arts.

“We used music and poetry and film,” Stanford explained. “The visual arts teacher came in to explore and make meaning of their lives by using art as a medium for expression.”

Stanford met her husband at one of the charter schools she worked at in Philadelphia. They’ve been married for seven years and have two sons, ages 6 and 3. The family now lives in Los Angeles, Calif.

Stanford currently works as a behavioral specialist supervising therapists and also as a consultant. She served both roles while earning a doctorate in education from the University of Southern California. She received an EdD in Organizational Change and Leadership May 11.

Why the move to the West Coast? Stanford says she wanted a new experience and a new space to learn more about the world. Plus she wanted to get away from snowy winters.

However, Stanford remains connected to her roots. She works as a consultant to New Jersey-based organizations to create infrastructure for educational programs.

She serves as a consultant for Yendor Arts in Newark in both strategic planning and programmatic design. Gilbert, who was a mentor to Stanford as part of SOUL, is the founder and CEO of that organization.

“It’s come full circle. We’re creating curriculum around how she was taught,” he said.

Gilbert flew out to California to attend Stanford’s graduation. “It was very emotional to see the work that we do come to fruition. It’s one of the reasons you do the arts education piece, the mentoring piece,” he said. “With resources and access, you can be anything. The sky’s the limit.”

Stanford hopes her story helps people realize the importance and impact of youth programs, particularly centered around the arts.

“They provide an outlet for self-expression. I just learned many skills that prepared me for college in a non-academic way,” she said.

Gilbert is extremely proud of Stanford and hopes there are more stories like hers.

“I’m looking for our next doctor coming out of Newark from these fantastic programs,” he said.