
After her riveting report in 2007 on the children of Camden and the work of UrbanPromise, the news anchor has continued to stay connected to the city.

By Terri Akman

Affectionately known as D-Dawg to the students and staff at Camden's UrbanPromise, Diane Sawyer's hard-hitting interviews with President Barack Obama and terrorist Saddam Hussein might seem out of character. Her nickname – and the students who gave it to her – bring out the softer side of the ABC World News anchor and fill a very special place in her heart.

The love affair began back in November 2007, when Sawyer produced a story on Camden youth for ABC's "20/20." She focused on students from UrbanPromise. "They wanted to follow good kids living in difficult circumstances in poverty to see how they navigated life," recalls Bruce

Main, president of UrbanPromise. "They followed them around for a year to see life through their eyes."

The life they saw was tragic: Ivan Stevens was 4 years old at the time and looking forward to kindergarten. The precocious, wide-eyed toddler – homeless with little food to eat – wished only to live in a house with a bedroom just for him. "He has dreams that he wishes he could fly to get us a house," his mother, Precious Stevens, says in the television segment. Ivan was shown pretending he was Superman.

Viewers watched as Ivan and other Camden kids spoke of their hopes and dreams amid squalor and violence. The "20/20" segment, titled "Waiting on the

Diane Sawyer





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World to Change,” aired in January 2007 and was the first in a three-part series spotlighting the impact of poverty, crime and violence on Camden youth. Quickly, UrbanPromise received an outpouring of interest in volunteering and financial donations.

“It brought attention to what was going on in the city of Camden, and our organization was certainly presented in a favorable light as a response to some of the challenges some people are facing,” says Main. “We set up trusts so people could donate specifically to the kids, with funds set aside for housing, school and food.”

For Sawyer, this was more than just a news story. She became a champion of the

school, lending her time and voice in fundraising support, and keeping tabs on the students she met, along with their families. Last month, despite having a head cold and an all-consuming pre-election workload, she attended UrbanPromise’s 25th anniversary celebration and enjoyed dinner with her old friends.

“I am so moved by the valor and the brilliance of children who have so much less encouragement than the children who live sometimes just a mile or two away,” Sawyer says.

“Their dreams and sense of what’s possible is every bit as strong as someone who grew up in a much easier life. They inspire us, and every single one of them is a universe of hope. It’s simply wonderful

after you’ve done a story like our first one to know that when you go home at night, there’s someone caring as much as you do.

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an expert on all UrbanPromise kids – I think each of them has an individual story – but I do know they feel there is a shelter, and they do feel there is a wonderful expectation for each of them to achieve. It was so interesting to be there for the anniversary and to hear the students and the people who had worked at UrbanPromise – who had left and then came back – bringing back with them this incredible passion. That says so much about an organization and the ripple effect it can have.”

A seasoned journalist, Sawyer must leave her personal feelings out of the stories she covers, but as a step-mother to three grown children and grandmother of four, she says some stories go straight to her heart.

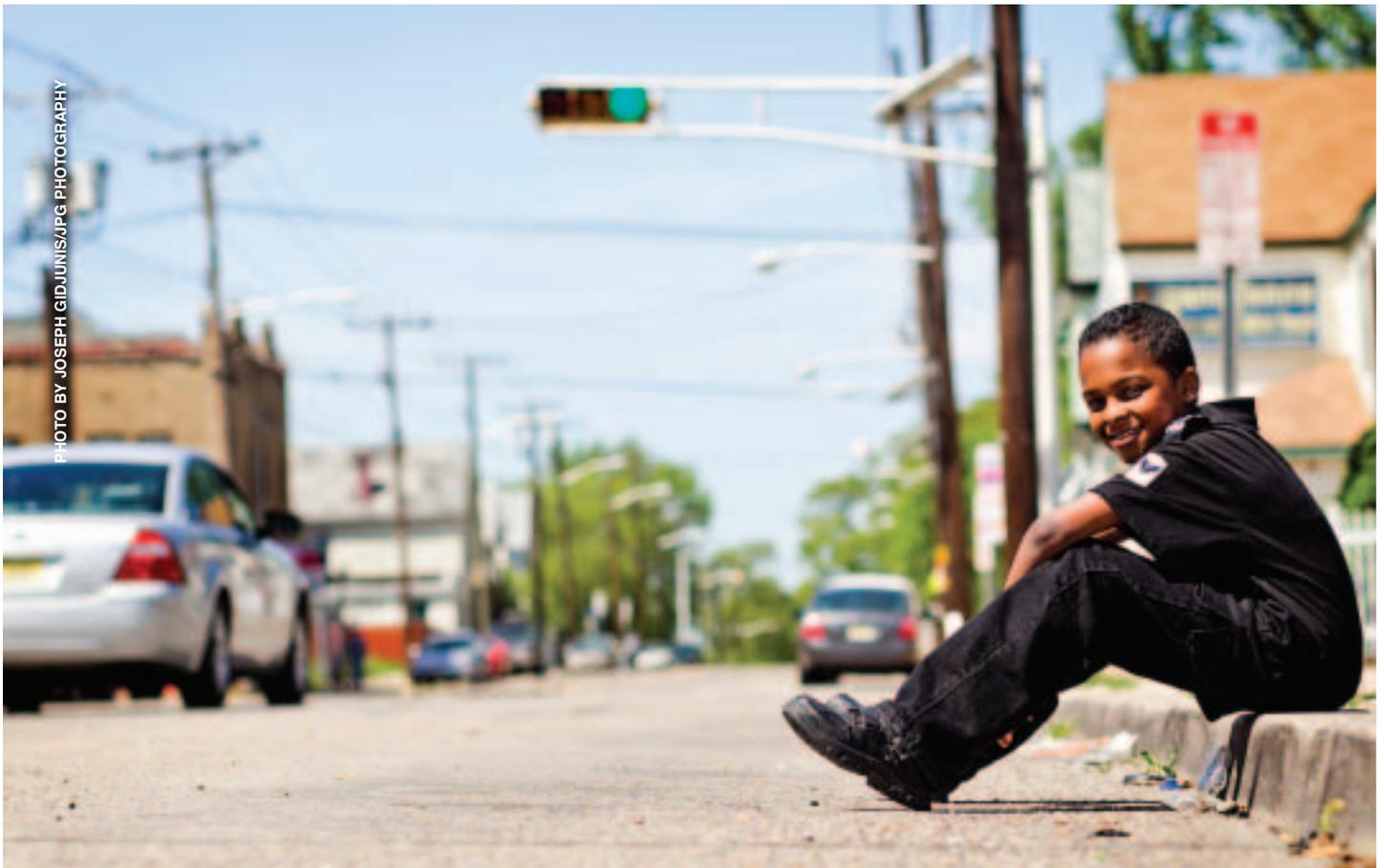
“In a story like this, if you’re not invested in what is possible for these children if they get the attention of the

world and the belief and help of the world, then I’m not really sure who you are,” she says. “Family is the center of my life. Yesterday I had two grandchildren, two nephews and an improvised day care center in my living room for several hours. It was bliss!”

“You keep coming back to the thing you love, and it doesn’t change that much. I still remember when I didn’t know what I was going to do when I grew up. My dad said to me, ‘What do you love, and can you do it in a place that isn’t necessarily easy, because everybody is going to have it tough at what they want to do.’ He also said, ‘Make sure you are trying to help people while you are doing it, because that will be the beating heart that will keep it alive. Don’t be afraid when you don’t do it well, find the people that are going to help you through it.’”

Sawyer considers the UrbanPromise kids extensions of her own family. In the seven years since first meeting her, students – including Ivan, now 11, and his classmate Karim Council, now 12, – have visited Sawyer in New York twice, turning the tables and interviewing her. In fact, that’s how the kids arrived at her D-Dawg nickname. Karim told her that nicknames were important at UrbanPromise, and the students did their homework in choosing several options they felt would suit her. They asked her to choose among Louisville Lily (Sawyer’s hometown), Blue Note Beauty (her a cappella group at Wellesley College), and

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Karim Council, 12, sits on Federal Street in East Camden; (opposite page) Ivan Stevens, 11, and Diane Sawyer leave the 25th anniversary celebration for UrbanPromise at the Collingswood Grand Ballroom

her personal favorite, D-Dawg. After a moment or two of careful consideration, Sawyer chose D-Dawg.

The conversations haven't all been so lighthearted. Sitting on the ABC News set during their first visit, Karim, 5 at the time, asked her, "Out of all the places in the world, why did you pick Camden, New Jersey?"

"To meet you," she responded sincerely, without missing a beat. Then, choosing her words carefully, she added, "We like to go to places where we think people can help each other."

And help each other they certainly have. Today, Ivan and Karim are thriving. Both boys love to read and are on the honor roll. Karim, (nickname Juju) is now 12, and wants to be a veterinarian or an actor after college. Speaking of Sawyer he says, "She's cool, she's fun, she's active, and she's taught me that anything you put your mind to, you can always succeed in it. She always gives me a big hug when I see her. When we had dinner, she didn't want to eat her apple pie. I convinced her how good it was, and she ate all of it."

Apple pie aside, Sawyer was thrilled with the progress she saw in her dinner companions. "Ivan, now 11, told me about his reading with such excitement, and when you look at how he was living before – it's just the light in their faces," she says.

"I remember when I first met Miss Diane Sawyer," recalls Ivan, "I was excited, because I was meeting a celebrity. Now she's a great friend who I look up to a lot. There are a lot of things I learned from her, like the fact that she loves and will do anything for UrbanPromise. Of all the schools, she picked ours."

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oday Ivan has his own room in the apartment he shares with his mother and younger brother Imere, and he enjoys visits from his father. "I get to have my own privacy, and I can study harder than I used to," he says, proud of his room's Superman décor.

Ivan wants to be an artist one day, after he finishes college. The fifth grader enjoys helping his mom with her math homework (his best subject and the one she has the most trouble with) as she takes courses at Camden County College in preparation for her GED. "I feel amazing that she's in college, WOW!" he exclaims. "She's good in reading and spelling but she comes to me, my brother and my dad for help in math."

"He's a great role model for me, so I'm trying to be a great role model for him and his brother as well," says Stevens, 31, Ivan's mother. Her life has also taken a dramatic turn since appearing in that first "20/20" segment. When not in school, Stevens works as an after-school aide at UrbanPromise.

"That first '20/20' interview was difficult, because it was a rough time in my life, and there was a lot of frustration about what I was going through," Stevens recalls about being homeless and struggling to feed her children. "It was benefiting me though that I could tell my story and others could hear it. People started seeing the real life going on



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Behind the Scenes WEB VIDEO

Log on to sjmagazine.net to watch Diane Sawyer's original "20/20" Segment "Waiting on the World to Change."

Diane Sawyer speaks to UrbanPromise "Founders" - people who have donated every year for 15 years - at the recent 25th anniversary celebration

PHOTO BY JFG PHOTOGRAPHY

(Opposite page top) Karim Council and his little brother Karie outside UrbanPromise; (middle) The Stevens family: Imer, Ivan and Precious; (bottom) Diane Sawyer reacts to a T-shirt bearing her nickname, D-Dawg

around them, and that through all the struggles there is light at the end of the tunnel.

“I learned that no matter where you’re from or what you’ve been through, you can succeed in life. I felt blessed with how much people helped us, like God chose us and there were real angels out there. I plan to break the cycle of homelessness, so my boys won’t have to go through that in life.”

Jennifer Satterfield, a Mantua resident who runs the Clearview Regional High

alike than we are different, with the same feelings, emotions, desires and activities in common.”

While some progress has been made for the residents of Camden, Sawyer knows there is still much work to be done. “We look at the poverty numbers and the decrease in median income in an area that could not afford a decrease, and we look also at the ongoing risk, the violence around them,” says Sawyer. “I am an eternal believer in hope and possibility taking hold. The more kids who go away and come back to reach out to others, the stronger it will be, but we know right now, statistically, they are still dealing with

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some of the burdens we saw.”

School diversity program, vividly remembers the effect the “20/20” segment had on her. “Everyone knows that Camden is a bad area, but to humanize it with the children emphasizing that it is only 25 minutes away and there are kids living like that definitely got to me,” she recalls. “We decided to show the film to the whole school, and so many of my high school students and teachers wanted to get involved.”

The “20/20” segment continues to be seen on college campuses in sociology and urban studies classes. “That piece has had a shelf life beyond the initial showing even six years later,” Main says. “UrbanPromise, now in its 25th year, is making a difference in kids’ lives, so to have somebody with Sawyer’s stature highlight our work is very encouraging.”

A committed relationship began that has included assisting UrbanPromise teachers and mentoring students. “My big objective was partnering some Clearview High School students with some UrbanPromise students. We start each year with a phenomenal bus tour of Camden that talks about the economic decline, crime rate and why Camden is the way it is. Then we do a cross-cultural exchange where my kids get to see what goes on there, and another time we bring the UrbanPromise kids to Clearview.”

“You can see that the students have the thing we all know makes a difference in our lives – even if it’s just one person, who is steady and there for you, looking in your eyes and saying, ‘Yes, we see you. You can do this,’” Sawyer says. “I can see the changes individually in these children. Our story was not just about them, but about each of them representing hundreds of other children just like them. They are making courageous choices all the time.”

Throughout the year, the students work together on holiday celebrations, after-school programs and other events. “Empathy is one of the most important things for everybody in the world, and I’ve seen the students develop empathy and a connection with these kids,” she says. “They realize we are much more

Sawyer is proud of the photos of her UrbanPromise friends that hang on her office wall and thrilled with the nickname they bestowed upon her. “With apologies to Snoop Dogg, I am so owning that – the Camden UrbanPromise D-Dawg,” she says. “I do have my T-shirt now that says D-Dawg on the back, so I feel I’m now equipped to show up to UrbanPromise the next time.” ■



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(From the top, clockwise) Diane Sawyer takes Ivan Stevens and Karim Council to the ABC newsroom last year; Karim interviews Sawyer on the set of "Good Morning America" in 2007; Sawyer lets Ivan and Karim sit in the anchor's chair on the ABC World News set last year; Karim and Ivan escort Sawyer into this year's 25th anniversary celebration