

THE FAMILY VAN IN THE PRESS

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Community Care on Wheels

By: Shavonne Singelton

“ We are known as the knowledgeable neighbor of the streets,” says Rainelle Walker-White White.

That knowledgeable neighbor White refers to is The Family Van, a mobile preventive health and social service program. Since 1992, it has been offering free and confidential health screenings, education and social service referrals to the uninsured and poverty stricken communities of Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan – communities that are disproportionately affected by disease and mortality, specifically cancer, diabetes, heart disease, HIV/AIDS, infant mortality and substance abuse.

“ A lot of times the van is an avenue for people who don't have any health insurance. They know they can at least get screening, and based on our findings, we can shelter them into a hospital,” White says. “ We bridge the gap between the health centers and the hospitals.”

White has been with The Family Van, first as a coordinator, then as director of services since 1994, when it was known as “the baby van.” She joined the team after working with Healthy Baby Healthy Child, a Boston-based program that provides expecting mothers with free home visits from public health nurses and advocates.

“ Rai is the glue that holds the van together,” says Jennifer Bennet, executive director of The Family Van. “Her deep connections with the community and breadth of experience are one of the key reasons why we are such a trusted resource.”

It is such an inviting and welcoming atmosphere that no one notices the worn interior or lifting carpet and they couldn't care less that the van frequently shuts down, gets a little crowded and sometimes is even operating without heat. All that matters are the services being provided and vital knowledge that each person takes home.

“Rainelle is a big provider for the Family Van. She represents everything that it represents. That dedication to the community and being there for the people--she transforms that when she comes home,” says her husband, Cedric Jr. “ She is a caring and compassionate woman.”, “ I really feel like God has given me a healing gift; a gift for taking care of people,” White says. “ I just want to be able to help people. If I see something wrong and I know that I can help somebody along the way, then it's a good thing.”

White has become a master of balancing that good thing between her career and family and miraculously manages to save some energy for her husband and five children: Kristan, 18, Samuel, 16, Cedric III, 11 and the twins Raquelle and Rainelle, 8. Her children have learned how to share “Mom” with other members of the community who have become extended family.

“Rai is the heart of the van,” says Mark Cohen, health educator and van driver. “ People are always asking for Rai. They know her, they want to spend time with her, and she is always getting hugs. She is very popular.”

White's take-charge attitude and compassionate ways have created bonds of trust and dependence that have established long-lasting relationships with many clients. She runs the van with such grace and fluidity that she is commonly mistaken for the doctor, and even has “regulars” who specifically request her and refuse to work with other staff members.

White coordinates all of the van's services, maintains community outreach relations, and ensures that operational procedures are properly executed. White also manages and trains the van staff, volunteers, and undergraduate interns and residents from Harvard medical school, Tufts University and Mass General Hospital.

On the van there are no white coats, waiting rooms, or medicine and doctoral terminology, only reassuring faces and warm touches.

“Some say that in life we are on a stage... so I am going to shine for however long it takes and in whatever direction God directs me in,” says Rainelle White. “I don't know it all, I just know that what I do and how I do it makes an impact on somebody's life.”

