

ALEX FARRIS / FOR THE STAR

Naeemah Jackson of the Peace Learning Center explains the 10 stages of loss to the Heffner family in their unfinished apartment in the Near Eastside. The home they had been living in recently burned.

# Bringing peace to family battles

By Alex Campbell

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Naeemah Jackson sticks two large sheets of paper to the wall. Written in marker is today's topic: "stages of loss."

Levia Heffner and her four children sit on the carpet of their new, unfurnished living room. "Go back to the day of the fire, to that night," Jackson tells them. "Denial and disbelief. Speak on that."

Levia's 16-year-old daughter, Denia, starts. When the family's house burned down, she lost some prized pictures of her father and a copy of his obituary. "It's all I had of him," she says.

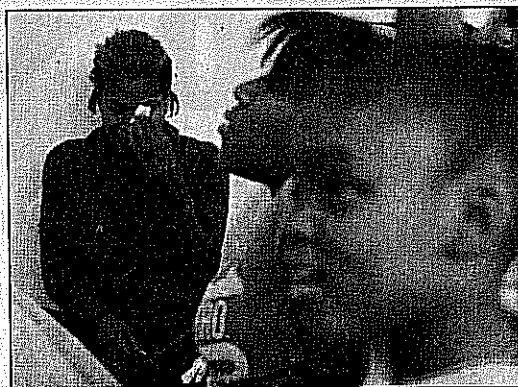
Both Levia and Denia have started to cry. Jackson keeps going. "The fear. Sleeplessness. Anxiety. Agitation. Anger. Arguing. Headaches," she says. "Who has experienced any of that kind of stuff since the fire?"

"All of us," Denia says.

"OK, well let's discuss it," Jackson says. "Get it out. Let's discuss this."

But soon, she stops herself. "Hold on," she says, "let me go check on your mama."

Levia has left the room.



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Levia Heffner cries as her daughter Jazmine, 10, answers a question from Jackson.



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## Peace

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### She needed some help

The Heffners had spent the better part of a year living with Levia's brother and feeling homeless. A couple of months ago, they settled into a home of their own. Then one day, as Levia pulled into the street, she saw firetrucks.

Luckily, no one was inside their home. But once again, the Heffners were starting over.

The wound is still raw, so Jackson's line of inquiry might seem like salt. But as a "peace education facilitator" from the Peace Learning Center, who has been working with the Heffners for about a year, this is her job.

Her involvement with the family started when Levia's son Jalen, 14, got picked up by police after getting involved in a gang. The charges weren't too serious, but an officer asked Levia if she wanted help keeping her son off the streets.

Levia is a proud single mother, but she started to think that maybe she needed some help. She said yes and was eventually referred to the Peace Learning Center. She has been working with Jackson — on Jalen, on the house fire, on whatever else might come up — since.

The focus of the nonprofit, which was founded 15 years ago, has been to teach preventive anti-violence education in sessions with large groups, often at schools. Its "Connect and Communicate" program aims to aid families on a more intimate level.

The idea is to tackle the day-to-day family quarrels that have the potential over weeks and months to build into something damaging. "A lot of violence comes from a bunch of little things that have not been dealt with," said Tim Nation, Peace Learning Center's founder and executive director.

### Passing the "talking stick"

The approach requires a lot of talking, talking about feelings. Enter Jackson, a 61-year-old great-grandmother who is liable to wear a green tie-dyed "Peace" shirt. She chats on the phone with Levia two or three times a week and meets with the family for sessions once a week.

The sessions begin with a "talking stick." Each person in the group must take the stick, state his or her name, talk about one positive emotion and one negative, and say "I'm in," before passing it to the next person.

The conversation may turn to something theoretical, such as how to prevent an argument from escalating, or broach broader topics, including "what is peace."

And that's usually just fine. "It keeps down a lot of tension that we had built up in our family by not being able to communicate right," Levia says.

These days, the tension can be traced to a very specific source.



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The Heffners — Jalen, 14; MiShana, 13; Denia, 16; Jazmine, 10; and mother Levia — are learning to better communicate with one another thanks to Naeemah Jackson (right).

After the fire, Jackson helped the Heffners quickly find a new apartment on the Near Eastside. And she helped grab them some bedding — an air mattress, a futon and a twin bed — as well as school uniforms, a few dishes and some toiletries.

But the electricity isn't fully hooked up, and there is no furniture. The living room is empty except for the shoes by the door and a couple of presents in the corner under what 10-year-old Jazmine calls the "invisible Christmas tree."

### Back to the peace session

So this isn't a normal peace session. There is a lot to talk through. And when Levia exits the living room in tears, Jackson follows her.

Levia comes back, and Jackson has them dive right back in. "So," she says, "anybody go through physical ramifications?"

Levia answers right away, her voice trembling. She has been sick and has lost her voice. She finds herself waking up at night and checking each room to make sure everything is OK.

"The other night," she says, "I went to sleep sitting up."

Jackson runs them through the remainder of the 10 "stages of loss." At Stage 4, "anger and guilt," she admonishes Levia for saying the fire happened because of her space heater. "That was bad wiring," Jackson says. Not Levia's fault.

Soon, Jackson moves onto a new topic: fear. The question: How do you deal with it? Do you fight, do you run away from it or do you just freeze?

Levia says she just wants to block the whole thing out of her mind as if it never happened. "When I don't hear about it or think about it," she says, "I'm OK."

"OK," Jackson replies. "But then you're pushing it down."

Levia continues.

## NONPROFIT SNAPSHOT

**WHAT:** Peace Learning Center.

**WHERE:** 6040 DeLong Road, Indianapolis. It used to be based out of Eagle Creek Park.

**WHAT IT DOES:** The agency's focus is on "social emotional learning" — how to work with other people to resolve conflicts. It holds sessions at schools and other gatherings around the city, does more up-close work with individual families and provides services at Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility.

**WHY:** It's all about prevention. The idea is to stop violent acts in the weeks and months before they happen by getting at the root causes.

**WHO:** The agency says it has reached 165,000 people in one form or another since its founding in 1997.

**CONTACT:** Tim Nation at [TNation@peacelearningcenter.org](mailto:TNation@peacelearningcenter.org).

## ABOUT SEASON FOR SHARING

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"I just really would rather just push it out my head," she says.

Jackson doesn't back down. "Guess what, family," she says. "The quicker we deal with this stuff, the quicker we get down to here," she says, tapping on Stage 10, "new identity."

Easier said than done. But Jackson will be back on Saturday with some winter coats, and she is looking for someone to donate furniture. She will be back next week, too, for another session. And she will answer the phone whenever Levia calls. Even if it's just to talk.

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