



# ON THE LEVEL

VOL. 21 ISSUE 1 | SPRING 2021 | DVULI.ORG

## The Courage of Ana Jara to Confront Chaos in Los Angeles

### OPINION:

**Jon Coker's**

Prescription for Healing  
Black and Blue Bruises

### BREAKTHROUGH:

**Wesley Reyes**

Is on the Streets of  
Cleveland Donning  
a New Badge of Honor



# Well, **EXCUSE!** YOU!

Being interrupted is inevitable. My wife, child, cat, church members, relatives, mentees, and yes, my boss, colleagues, and pastor are notorious for disrupting my preferred flow—most often unaware but all for legitimate reasons.

**T**here are various classifications of interruptions. However, to remain brief, I'll point to two: the welcome and the unwelcome.

I welcome the following interruptions: Dinner's ready. Would you pray for me? Please stop by the store. The game is on. Unwelcome interruptions stretch far and wide: Another youth was killed. Funding is being cut. They're rioting. Graduation rates are falling. Our dad moved out.

What blows me away are leaders who commit their lives to the kind of unwelcome interruptions that gray my hair. Ana Jara (Los Angeles 2010), Wesley Reyes (Cleveland 2013), Jordan Francis (Phoenix 2018), and countless DVULI alumni were built for such inevitabilities. They graciously welcome urgent texts in ALL CAPS, humbly dismiss themselves from special events, or courageously drive on "E" for extended distances to rescue someone.

In this first 2021 issue of *On the Level* (after a year of profound interruptions), Ana and Wesley share how they engage youth through law enforcement work that is congested with interruptions. In addition, we welcome the opinion of Jon Coker (San Antonio 2017), who sheds light on the sensitive subject of urban youth and police relations. These alumni and others realize the hard reality is that interruptions are not going away, some of which may involve those who enforce the law.

The next time you receive a parking, speeding, or traffic light citation, remember others are facing worse, unwelcome interruptions.

Trust the process...

Gerald Bell, Editor (Kansas City 2003)

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## Class of 2021

After postponing the DVULI training in 2020, our team is excited to resume the investment in Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Newark, and Oakland. It is also our privilege to welcome additional participants who were added to fill open cohort slots.



DT Shackelford



Letisha Owens



Lynelle Steele



Joel Ortiz



Jason Curry



Kekoa Hubbard

Join DVULI in welcoming these new participants to the 2021 cohorts, and most of all, to trusting the process.



# BLACK & BLUE: A Bruised Generation

Opinion By **Jon Coker**  
(San Antonio 2018)

I heard a story about a dog that was hit by a car shortly after giving birth to a healthy litter of puppies. Her hind legs were paralyzed after the accident. The pups learned to pull themselves around the house on their front legs while dragging their hind legs behind them like their mom.



**I**t's natural for us to pattern our parents. When they walk with a limp, we adopt their hobbling habits assuming we're doing the right thing. Today, I see our youth limping in their attempts to echo the courage of the former generations that were bruised in the fight to end police brutality.

As this generation is coming to age, they're developing their pattern of faith after their leaders. The way they address social and spiritual issues can cause them to limp or leap. Leaders leave a mark when they turn a blind eye to wrongdoing. The greatest imprint is made when leaders model faith.

In Acts 12, the church incurred a devastating blow as James, the brother of John, was killed with the sword. When King Herod heard the people's applause, he proceeded to arrest the apostle Peter as well. The church had a decision to make at that moment when they faced

the cruelty and injustice of a corrupt system. In response to the hatred, they did not storm the streets in riotous protests. Instead, they stormed the heavens in radical prayer. While the church was praying, an angel was breaking Peter out of prison. Under the same persecution, James was killed, and Peter was delivered. The game-changer in the two realities was the earnest prayer of the church (Acts 12:5). They were bruised, but they assumed the battle posture of intercession with unwavering faith. It worked!

As we approach hurting communities, we can take a cue from the fathers of the early church. In those days, they tended to the bruises of the body of Christ by going back to God and putting Him in remembrance of His own Word. They understood that they couldn't trust a corrupt government to uphold a righteous law, so they pleaded their case in the highest court until divine legislation was enforced. Prayer is law enforcement. It puts a faith demand on the promises of God's Word until supernatural power takes the form of practical solutions in our communities.



The early disciples trusted the Holy Spirit to guide their social action. Today, young people are downloading their opinions from social media and rallying behind anything that makes noise.

Like the church in Acts 12, our communities have suffered many bruises. We've witnessed black youth hunted down while jogging and shot to death while sleeping in their homes. We've learned that even obeying police orders can cost us our lives. Blatant police brutality, lack of accountability, and abuse of power destroy the confidence in our urban communities in law enforcement. Justice, at best, has been nothing more than a slap in a black face and a pop on a blue wrist. This is the gas that agitates the flame's retaliation.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." He condemned riotous behavior calling it counterproductive while expressing empathy for angry, muted people. Dr. King's efforts contributed to change in the laws of the land, but only God can change the laws that govern man's heart. Laws don't heal bruises.

**"Only through a kingdom lens can we see and serve the person under the badge and the person under the skin."**

Bruises can be caused by severe external impact, or in some cases, by serious internal diseases. Unfortunately, a divided US will suffer from both, and our youth are inheriting those wounds. Therefore, kingdom leadership is vital. Only through a kingdom lens can we see and serve the person under the badge and the person under the skin.

I believe the Lord is looking for urban ambassadors who He can trust with balanced influence—people who will cash in their "blackness" and their titles at the cross to take up the cause of the kingdom. We cannot be effective youth leaders in urban communities if we're imparting a heart of bitterness to the next generation. We've come to a boiling point of offense where many black leaders are so blue that they'd prefer retaliation over reconciliation. They preach the gospel of the bruised but forget that mercy only flows through the blood. Do we want the change we call for or do we just want to be mad?

This generation needs leaders like Paul, who was tough enough to call corrupt leaders "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27) but sensitive enough to lead a discouraged centurion to Christ and tell him, "Don't harm yourself" (Acts 16:28). This is the ministry of our time. Young people need to see God's master plan playing out even through oppressive situations.

Paul and Silas praised their chains off and the cell doors opened, but they saw the open doors as an opportunity of ministry rather than a jailbreak. If we heal the bruises of our past trauma, we'll see the broken hearts behind the badges and find that we hold the power of transformation in our streets.

Salvation is not in government or police reform. It's in God. If you throw your hands up, let it be in surrender to God's truth. In Acts 12, young Rhoda heard Peter—the answered prayer—knocking at the door, but she looked to the leaders to open it up. The Lord is charging student ministry leaders to open the door so the kingdom of God can come in, and the highest authority can rule and restore all things. Change starts when the church answers the door.

Jon Coker (San Antonio 2018) is the Student Ministries Director at Christian World Worship Center in San Antonio, Texas. He is also a multimedia journalist and digital reporter for KENS-5, a public speaker, and a contributing writer. [jcoker34@gmail.com](mailto:jcoker34@gmail.com)





# Police, Students, and Parents

## Doing the Hard Work

Ana Jara Sees the  
Possibilities of Reconciliation  
in Her Own Backyard

By **Kimberlee Mitchell**, Staff Writer

Ana Jara (Los Angeles 2010) was out of town when she received the text, “Turn on the news, NOW!” She flipped on the TV and was shocked to see rioting in her hometown of Santa Monica, California. Ana saw officers in full riot gear standing off against angry activists whose protest of police brutality against minorities morphed into destruction, looting, and chaos.

**T**he riots of 2020 erupted in the very city where she was raised and has worked as a Youth and Family Services Support Coordinator for the Santa Monica Police Department (SMPD) since 2015. Ana broke down in tears, “Everything I have worked on for the past five years is down the drain!”

Traveling back to LA, she felt broken and defeated. Not long after, Ana took a phone call from her direct report who said, “The officers are really struggling. We need your help. What can we do?”

Ana hunkered down and reflected on how God had been using her in this unique position, which has helped create an understanding between law enforcement and youth in the community. Both the SMPD and Ana knew that resuming her Juvenile Diversion Program (JDP) work was exactly what Santa Monica needed in this critical season of reconciliation.

When Ana started her youth services job at the police department more than five years ago, she sat down with the officers. She learned the system didn’t have any referral services in place for first- or second-time youth offenders. The officers could not mandate any type of counseling for youth—there weren’t even pamphlets of supportive services to leave behind. “I have nothing for them,” explained an officer. “Based on the limitations of what my badge can legally allow me to do, the best I can do is go out, find them, and bring them back home.” She found that officers and this department wanted to help intervene but didn’t know how. Their tools were all enforcement and no long-term support. Ana knew there was a “safety net of youth programs and supportive services in the city,” so she devised a plan to connect officers with these helpful resources and then follow up with youth.

### **JUVENILE DIVERSION PROGRAM**

With the full support of her chief and department, Ana developed an atypical “services first model,” which means once a juvenile gets arrested and is referred to her, individualized services commence. It begins with making



assessments, and then a plan that includes diversion classes and community service hours is devised. An intern (an MSW candidate) manages each case, and when appropriate, additional services such as counseling, anger management training, school support, or group services are provided.

"That's really where kids begin to discuss a lot or disclose things," says Ana. "We've had young people disclose a real substance use issue, and we were able to refer them to drug counseling. We've had young people disclose suicidal thoughts, so then we've been able to refer them to the appropriate services. We've had all sorts of really interesting, heartbreaking but transformative conversations with young people through these assessments."

To date, 130 youth have been referred to the JDP from the SMPD. There are six young people on the current caseload (COVID-19 stalled the process), and 97 have already graduated. The program boasts an 87 percent completion rate.

Ana's JDP also includes a three-pronged prevention plan for officers, schools, and parents.

#### **OFFICERS - The Police Cadre**

Ana convenes a group of 12 officers that meet bimonthly for training. The topics of the sessions include adolescent brain development, trauma-informed care, restorative justice, communication with teens, and engagement practices/approaches. These sessions are supplemented with opportunities to connect via weekly dialogs or one-on-one discussions with local youth over a meal.

#### **SCHOOLS - Youth Prevention**

Throughout the year, the SMPD conducts prevention courses at the local schools in leadership groups or government classes. Experiences like mock traffic stops, where youth and officers reverse roles, are eye-opening for both parties and help create empathy and connection. Many officers shared stories about how impactful building rapport in class is and how it translates out in the field. Youth admitted to never realizing how anxious officers are when approaching cars. This healthy interaction provides an invaluable experience from which students can draw at least one positive interaction with officers.

"One of the most powerful things I've seen is to have officers in the room," notes Ana. "It helps officers to humanize and gives them a full picture of what a young person is going through."

#### **PARENTS - The Parent Project**

When parents saw what the police department was doing for their children, they asked for similar help: "As an elementary school parent, there's a lot of different things that they give us, but once our kids become teenagers, these crazy little balls of hormones and impulsivity, how do we deal with them?" Within a year, Ana launched the SMPD's Parent Project, a voluntary intensive 10-week support group for teen parents. The program addresses critical yet common issues. A practical six-point plan is taught, and mental health referrals and case management are assigned when needed. So far, nine sessions have been completed, and 81 parents have graduated. Due to the program's success, plans are underway to expand to a similar course for parents of elementary-aged students.

With years of youth ministry roots, Ana never thought God would call her to the ministry for police officers, which has become a key role in her work. "My youth ministry heroes and sheroes taught me the idea that God is wherever we are, and ministry is wherever God is leading us to," Ana says. She credits where she is in her career to DVULI and shares, "At NC2, systems thinking spoke to my soul. It helped me make the decision to attend grad school and to study policy." Her JPD plan, deemed a Georgetown Certified Diversion Model, was based on a paper she wrote back in grad school. "It is largely what I learned in DVULI that focused my sights on JDP and all of the system work we are doing here locally."

Ana's beloved Santa Monica, named after the patron saint who prayed for her wayward son, was known for her patience, gentleness, and kindness. Ana leans on the same fruits of the Spirit as she prayerfully serves troubled youth in the wake of the riots. Her work marks the beginning of unprecedented truth and reconciliation between the city's youth and police departmental norms, bringing hope to all.

**"One of the most powerful things I've seen is to have officers in the room. It helps officers to humanize and to give them a full picture of what a young person is going through."**



# Jordan Francis (Phoenix 2018)

**ORGANIZATION(S):** Realtalk and Reframe  
**CURRENT POSITION:** Chief Executive Officer

## Why would God call Jordan Francis to minister to urban youth?

I am a black former college athlete from England with a unique look, a challenging story, and a plan. Those characteristics allow me to confidently enter doors that are unfortunately closed too often to people of color. With every open door, I consider how I can take what God has given me to open doors, leverage friendships, and equip teens with nonprofits, LLCs, and business plans.

Since I am done being an upfront speaker, I am sure God wants me to train leaders who will empower this generation to charge forward righteously. That is why Reframe [the for-profit enterprise I lead] is writing curriculum with teenagers (both believers and nonbelievers) from inner-city schools to directly benefit both audiences. These teaching tools are crafted from a distinct space with psychology and theology integrated with a business entrepreneur element.

## What is your mission for youth, and how are you fulfilling it?

My most significant concern is showing this generation how God is just while calling them to practice justice. Teenagers are justice and compassion-oriented leaders who love their friends and care about their causes. I desire to see justice come about in their homes and schools while equipping them with tools to build the reality of their dreams.

Realtalk, our nonprofit, focuses on open forum conversations in public schools by creating settings that encourage dialogue about controversial issues in a noncontroversial way. Reframe takes knowledge obtained through the public school system, teen dialogues, and church contexts and blends them into curriculums and training materials to reach youth—both believers and nonbelievers.

## How did you know you were called to reach today's generation of youth?

I started serving in college ministry and then moved to Arizona with my wife in 2016 to help a friend launch a church. While praying about growing the church, we launched Realtalk, and I felt the Holy Spirit leading us to work with community high schools. I saw broken and hurting students from various backgrounds and related to many of their stories. Each day we serve in the schools is a confirmation that high school ministry is why God sent us to Arizona.

## As a relatively young ministry, what challenges have you faced?

When we first began Realtalk, our most significant challenges were credibility, recognition, and financial backing. The organizations that wanted to stick with us could not afford to stay, and those that could afford it did not last. We also had internal challenges. Over time, we learned that sustained success takes resiliency, persistence, and committed consistency to our beliefs. We also learned how to show grace, be honest, and to dialogue. Conversation is good theology. Jesus was always talking with someone. We must create space for real conversation in our personal and professional lives while teaching teenagers to dialogue daily with their Creator.

## What do you hope to accomplish while you serve in this capacity?

The goal is to reframe the way we do youth ministry. God is reconciling the world to Himself. He is redeeming creation, and we are participants in that plan. We endeavor to develop this justice-seeking generation to be the church by pursuing kindness, building legacies, and creating more than just Sunday services. We want to help establish a new framework that drives teenagers to engage the world for Christ.





Jordan Francis

**"We endeavor to develop this justice-seeking generation to be the church by pursuing kindness, building legacies, and creating more than just Sunday services."**

**What has the ministry been able to achieve that keeps you encouraged?**

I am most [encouraged] when people who are not believers go to bat for Realtalk. Our space in schools isn't guaranteed, and having advocates is crucial to extending our efforts. When nonbelieving school staff members engage their principal on our behalf, it says more than any pamphlet or sales pitch. We have been able to create environments for youth and adults, regardless of their belief system, to feel seen and be vulnerable.

Secondly, we created an app that takes the conversation kits used through our school programs into people's homes. The app gives tools and tips for peer-to-peer conversations and guides for parents. It is available on the iTunes App Store and the Google Play Store (RLTK.io).

By **Will Cumby** (Houston 2010)

**Does the ministry engage in collaboration in any way?**

We partner with a church by providing a safe space and food during lunch for their youth who attend a nearby high school. Those students start a club and build organic interest. Then we help lead the conversation and help disciple. The collaboration is between Realtalk, churches, schools, parents, and teen leaders.

**What kind of legacy do you hope Realtalk will see?**

We want to see emotionally healthy teens who are also spiritually healthy living a life that builds God's kingdom. I wholeheartedly believe you can be called to ministry and not be a pastor. You can be a light in the world without having to speak from a church pulpit. I want our fingerprint to reveal that we helped teenagers process their trauma and not fall away from their faith or make bad decisions when they become successful.

**What takeaway from your DVULI training are you applying to your work as a CEO?**

Balance and interdependence. I gained the practice of journaling while "trusting the process," and it has helped me to manage pursuing a master's degree, working for a church, running a nonprofit and a for-profit organization, all while being married with three children. At the end of the day, my priority is being present with my family and observing the Sabbath. I still struggle with delegating, but I am growing. Interdependence is also a major principle. John 17 and Psalm 133 challenge those who care about evangelism to also care about unity.

**What can your DVULI family be praying for as you continue in ministry?**

I ask that you pray for my endurance. This work is a long game, and like soccer, so many things are going on at once. I need patience and wisdom to create and make the right decisions to obtain the right results for God's kingdom. Also, pray for our new baby that was born in March!



# Breakthrough

## Wesley Reyes (Cleveland 2013)

By Gerald Bell  
(Kansas City 2003)

In what could be recorded as one of the toughest years in history to be a police officer, Wesley Reyes (Cleveland 2013) graduated from the Cleveland Police Academy on November 6, 2020. He soon took to the streets to protect and serve citizens in the community where he's resided since first grade.

As a product of a Christian home growing up on the west side of Cleveland, Ohio, Wesley had the typical childhood aspirations for major league baseball, the motion picture industry, and law enforcement. Yet, there was no way this preacher's kid could escape what his parents instilled in him about pursuing "God's plan for your life."

"I have always had a passion for youth," says Wesley. "But I knew my calling would involve being with people, traveling, and evangelizing."

Wesley was in his early twenties when he assumed the youth pastor role under his dad's leadership. He frequently preached to youth, and at times, adults. This opened doors for him to speak at other churches locally and across the nation. These engagements worked well for Wesley who admits he never liked feeling restricted to doing ministry within the four walls of a church.



Although wearing a blue uniform and a badge wasn't exactly how Wesley envisioned taking the gospel to the streets, this new dimension of fulfilling God's call has offered more real-life ministry than pulpits or prayer meetings ever have.

"Ninety-five percent of the time you're going to a shots-fired, to a drug overdose, to a domestic violence scene, or to scenarios and situations where children are hurt," describes Wesley. "This work is more spiritual than it is emotional or physical."

According to Wesley, the responses to calls for help as a police officer mirrors urban youth ministry in his eyes. In a few short months on patrol, he's rescued abandoned minors off the streets, counseled youth on the brink of suicide, and spent several hours preventing young people from harming their mates or partners.

"When I look into their eyes, they are not bad people—they're just making bad decisions," reasons Wesley, who has a wife and three children (ages seven and younger) at home. "You see so much evil out there [that] you can start to question everything as you hear people questioning 'Where was God?'"

In the pages of Wesley's DVULI breakthrough plan, he considers not only the personal disciplines God expects of him but also reveals the importance of how his ministry methods should undergo a shift.

In 2013, he wrote, "As I've continued through DVULI, God just kept opening my eyes and tugging at my heart to the importance and reality of my choices and actions... to form a way of life that would help me overcome



**"You've got to be more consistent with your disciplines because in this position, and as one who carries firearms, you have to be ready for anything."**

In this role as an officer, the DVULI core value of balance resonates with Wesley as he has found that there are several routine disciplines required of him each day. Some of these include keeping a healthy diet, daily workouts at the gym, and staying spiritually astute through Bible devotion and prayer.

"When I am at the district getting dressed for work, I always listen to sermons or worship music in the locker room," he notes. "You've got to be more consistent with your disciplines because in this position, and as one who carries firearms, you have to be ready for anything."

Wesley continues to preach at his church and provides general youth ministry leadership. He points out that some of his learning as a participant in DVULI has afforded him the freedom to do ministry as a Cleveland police officer and urban youth pastor.

and breakthrough to fulfilling my purpose. I needed to change my approach and develop those plans." Referencing the "Strategy, Capacity, Relationship" curriculum principles, Wesley goes on to add, "This allowed me to be more open to new relationships outside of the church and build them. It also led me to interdependence and letting go of my pride and giving others the opportunity to help and to lead."

There have been days Wesley admits he's wondered if being an officer is God's plan for his life that his parents taught him about. He says he has no regrets and loves what the work requires of him. "I love direct connection with people in the community, helping those who need help and having interaction with those who have no one," reflects Wesley, who also serves as chaplain for the Cleveland Indians minor league team. "I also like being there to interpret for those in need who speak Spanish."

Despite the negative perceptions some police are confronted with around the nation, Wesley says his choice to step into this position is a breakthrough chapter in his life. He acknowledges there are times when the press doesn't report an entire story which may contribute to parts of the negativity. But he contends he's grateful for the opportunity to be "the servant that people can confide in."



# Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril

**Resource Recommendation**  
**By Ron Carter** (Birmingham 1999)

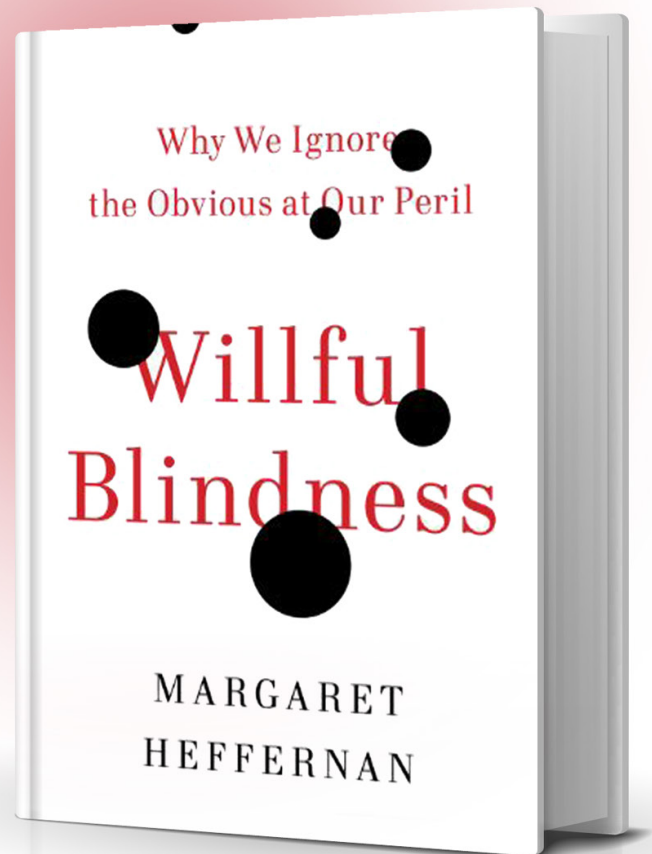
Most, if not all of us, are familiar with the expression “the elephant in the room.” Simply stated, this idiomatic phrase refers to an obvious reality that no one wants to talk about or mention. But why? Entrepreneur and author Margaret Heffernan explores this question in her book, *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*.

Originally a nineteenth-century legal concept, the term *willful blindness* refers to the phenomenon of deliberately ignoring or choosing not to “see” readily available information. Using a case study approach, Heffernan examines some of the surprising reasons we turn a blind eye to problems. Heffernan, however, isn’t content with merely exploring the problem; she provides practical strategies for preventing pitfalls and disasters in both our personal and civic lives.

Have you ever uttered the words, “How could I have been so blind?” If so, you’ll want to get a copy of this book. Once you have yours, comment on Facebook or any DVULI social media platform so we can continue this conversation about ways *Willful Blindness* is beneficial to your life and those you serve.

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Available on Amazon Books.



What community-wide impact are you leading?

# Leader **Alert**



**Christopher Bates**

(Los Angeles 2010)

is leading production of *The AT Last Podcast* to address disparities in health and wellness taking place in underserved communities.

<https://open.spotify.com/>



**Sean Goode**

(Seattle 2012)

now leads a webinar with the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* on winning grants for advancing racial equity.



**Benita Hopkins**

(San Francisco 2015)

was a lead voice during anti-human trafficking month in a podcast, a press conference, and a teen summit.



**Ana Jara**

(Los Angeles 2010)

is leading a partnership effort for capacity sustainability with a team of civic-minded professionals, including an administrative analyst, a licensed clinical social worker, and employees from the city of Santa Monica.



**Fred Lynch**

(Dallas 2011)

led a Black History Month discussion series called "Whose History Are We Teaching?" The month-long video conference attracted urban ministry workers from across the US.



**Dimas Salaberrios**

(New York 2010)

led as producer of a documentary feature film, *Chicago: America's Hidden War*, which was considered for an Academy Award.



# AT UMINI UPDATES



**Jerry Torrez**  
(Denver 2012) accepted the role of Commissioner for the Mayor's Youth Commission in Denver.



**Daniel Cody**  
(Neward 2014) accepted the position of Student Ministries Pastor at Hope Community Church in Raleigh, North Carolina.

**Fred Lynch**

(Dallas 2011) led a Black History Month discussion series called "Whose History Are We Teaching?"



**Domingo Mota**

(Los Angeles 2005) is now a Regional Manager for CarePortal, based in Kansas City, Missouri.



**Amy Rodriguez**

(Dallas 2019) gave birth to her new son, Emmanuel Rodriguez, on November 12, 2020.



**Jeremy Jerschina**

(Newark 2014) was promoted to COO of New City Kids in November 2020.

**Wilbur Smart**

(Boston 2006) transitioned to the newly established role of Community Support Manager at Madison Park Development Corporation.



**Cara J. Martin**

(New York City 2010) is now Mrs. Cara J. Allen. She married Matthew Allen, Jr. on January 3, 2021

**Monisha Randolph**

(Dallas 2015) is now Mrs. Monisha Clifton. Monisha married Nicholas Clifton on December 13, 2020.



**David Carranza**

(Oakland 2015) married Meryllia at Mansion Bell in Las Vegas on November 21, 2020.



**Malaelupe Samifua**

(Seattle-Tacoma 2014) was promoted to International Engagement Leadership Advisor at Highline College.

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[instagram.com/dvuli](https://www.instagram.com/dvuli)

**Terry Megli**

(Kansas City 2003) was promoted to CEO/Executive Director of City Union Mission, Inc. (CUMI).

