



Photo courtesy of 1Nation Mentoring

1Nation Mentoring founders are, from left to right, Kevin McNair, Lloyd Cheatom and Sam Morant.

## GUIDING TO GREATNESS

**In 1Nation, high expectations for students are the norm. By Adam Reger**

**E**very student is a king or queen to the founders of 1Nation Mentoring.

Every day, hundreds of students cross paths with Lloyd Cheatom, Kevin McNair and Sam Morant, who created the organization to change negative narratives around African American youth. Whether the students encounter the men through after-school programming at the Jeron X. Grayson Community Center in the Hill District, out in the community or in the hallways of one of the schools where the three mentors spend their days, each youth can be expected to be addressed as “King” or “Queen.” Every time.

“It’s so they know they can do anything, and to let them know you know it,” Mr. McNair said.

The titles may seem unimportant, but the emphasis on respect, expectations and the importance of how students think is at the core of 1Nation’s philosophy, represented in the motto “Everything begins with a thought.”

1Nation itself began as a thought, an idea tossed around among the three men during their time as Heinz Fellows. Through the fellowship program, college graduates interested in educational equity and social justice are placed in public schools in the City of Pittsburgh, where they collaborate with teachers, staff and school leaders to provide broad support to students.

The Heinz Endowments created the Heinz Fellows initiative in response to concerns about graduation rates and school disengagement among young African American men. Fellows support both male and female students’ social and emotional growth, as well as their academic progress, and engage with families and local community organizations.

While they were Heinz Fellows, Mr. Cheatom, Mr. McNair and Mr. Morant were stationed at different city schools and dreamed of ways

to keep their mentoring work going once the fellowship ended. With support from the Endowments, they created successful after-school and summer programming for youth and young adults ages 12 to 24. 1Nation also provides in-school mentoring at Pittsburgh Brashear High School in the city’s Beechview neighborhood, where many Hill District students are enrolled, and Sister Thea Bowman Catholic Middle School in Wilkesburg Borough.

Working closely with teachers, the three men develop programming for students deemed likely to benefit from 1Nation’s support, offering lessons and leading discussions. During one recent session, students created lists in response to the question, “What do people think you are that you’re not?” Students brainstormed misperceptions of themselves and used these incorrect assumptions—“I’m ghetto” or “I’m bougie”—to better define who they are.

As mentors, the 1Nation founders strive to balance love and support for their students with the clear message that much is expected of them. A student overheard using bad language might be told, “Watch your mouth, King.”

“Kids respect us because they want structure,” Mr. Cheatom said. “They long for these relationships with us. Once we figured that out, it’s been God’s work ever since.”

Derrell Key, a 17-year-old Brashear senior who lives in the Hill District, has participated in 1Nation for the past three years, and today is a student leader. He helps mentor freshmen and is always available for advice, both in and out of school.

He stresses to younger students the importance of controlling your own narrative. Prior to the program, Derrell viewed his options for success as limited to football and basketball. Thanks to 1Nation after-school and summer programs that brought in speakers and provided

tours of post-secondary campuses, Derrell plans to enter trade school to learn carpentry.

“The best part of the program is knowing there are people that care,” he said. “We have someone in our ear to tell us ‘This is wrong, this is right.’”

Stanley Thompson, the Endowments’ senior director for Learning, applauded the passion that Mr. Cheatom, Mr. McNair and Mr. Morant bring to their work, which impacts students not only in schools, but also in the community, where the men can help young people thrive.

“For students to see that someone really does value their contributions and where they want to go in life, and someone is going to help them get there, I think that is an incredible thing,” Mr. Thompson said.

Though the 1Nation mentors spend their days at Brashear and Bowman, the heart of the program is in the Hill District. Mr. Cheatom cited the neighborhood’s rich history as a mecca of the arts and of black culture as reasons why the organization is based there. It is a strong community partner, sponsoring community basketball leagues, collaborating with Allegheny County’s Learn and Earn summer youth employment program, and holding canned-food drives to benefit neighborhood residents.

1Nation’s presence in the community gives the men extra opportunities to engage with youth attending Brashear. Their visibility in the neighborhood means they frequently run into students at the supermarket, church or on the street.

“There aren’t always a lot of positive male role models for these kids,” Mr. Morant said. “So that kind of contact is important because we not only impact them at school but in the community.”

That presence can be absolutely critical. Faced with a shortage of positive African American male role models, many young people find negative examples among media stereotypes. As successful, college-educated young black men, the 1Nation founders offer a different picture.

“What Sam and Lloyd and Kevin have been able to do is create this counter-narrative that is very positive,” said Mr. Thompson. “And they’re not doing hand-holding. They’re modeling what these kids can do and become, and creating a belief that kids are able to embrace.”

Serving as role models extends to the men simply being themselves. They wear sneakers and jeans, and leave their tattoos visible.

“They’re seeing young black men who dress like them and listen to the same music—in a professional setting,” Mr. Morant said.

“We tell them to stay focused on the things that matter,” Mr. McNair added. “You don’t have to change who you are or dress a certain way. Success looks like you.” **h**