

Presentation by Author and Poet Asha Bandele
Presented by the UTD Institute for Urban Policy Research and McDermott Library
The University of Texas at Dallas
April 3, 2009

Dr. Timothy Bray - Good Morning. How is everybody today? My Name is Tim. I am the Director of the Institute For Urban Policy Research. We're new to the campus and have quickly found a friend. Together we're able to bring to you today Ms. Asha Bandele. She is a lot of things. She was an editor at Essence magazine. She is a poet, and it's fantastic that this is National Poetry Month, and we're able to bring her here. She's also an accomplished author whose stories tell of riveting details of life in America. And it's a life in America that we don't often hear about. One of the things that we do at the institute is work in North Texas on a lot of issues that most of us don't see on a day-to-day basis. There are neighborhoods in North Texas where 9 out of every 10 little babies are born to mothers who don't have the support of a father in the home. There are neighborhoods in North Texas where children are born sick, and access to healthcare isn't an option.

I just saw a statistic the other day that 1 in 8 incarcerated people in the world is an African-American. Yet they represent one-half of one percent of the world population. These issues face us at a global level. They face us at a national level. And Asha's work tells the story that doesn't come out of the statistics. And that is valuable. I am very glad we were able to partner with the library today and bring her in . . . She's going to grace us with a couple of readings from her work and will entertain questions from the audience. Afterwards, she will take pictures and sign books. So without any further blabbering, here she is.

Ms. Bandele: Good Morning. I get nervous. Do you mind if I stand back here, and everybody can hear me? Let me just say I'm greeting you on a very good morning, and I am so happy to be here. Last night at about 10:15 the New York State senate passed the most significant reforms to the Rockefeller drug laws in 36 years, 36 years ago, some extraordinarily Draconian laws took away judicial discretion, so no matter how low level you were, people were going to jail for 15 years, for 25 years, so some of what Tim was mentioning, We lost an entire generation of young people who probably really just needed treatment or who need alternatives but didn't need to be incarcerated for 25 years and destroyed our state's economy and destroyed whole neighborhoods because what they found was that in some areas, if you have for example, somebody who's running around doing bad things to people, robbing houses or whatever, the removal of that person strengthens the neighborhood.

But the exponential removal in black communities of so many black men, and now women, has actually made communities far more dangerous. So to have these laws changed means that people who can be redirected into treatment, and they won't be incarcerated, and we can just do so much more to strengthen our communities, which is hopefully what we're all here to do. So as Tim was saying, why are people so dour? I'm used to people smiling. I can't do that. This is a collaborative effort here. I'm going to stand up here and be nervous and up all night, you have to have some energy. Make some noise.

Good morning. Good morning. I know that we are in a university setting. We're not at a club or whatever. But I need a little love, a little energy. I came all the way from Brooklyn. What's up, Texas?

In any case, so - I want to talk a little bit about memoir because a lot of times people, I hate when people misuse terms. A memoir is not an autobiography, so if someone tells you you're not old enough to write one, they're wrong. It's a moment in time. It's not a novel. A novel is fiction. It is real life, unless you're James Fry or whatever, but it's supposed to be true. And for women, for women, it's an extremely

important genre because for so long, and this is especially true for black women, for so long we were not, and even now one can argue that whatever the interior, whatever our interior lives are, the interior of what we are as people, the dimensions that make us fully human are not discussed in a full bodied way. They are not put on a public dais, so people aren't going out and doing huge biographies on us and wondering, what was it like to be an enslaved woman, and what were the details? We had some idea, but we're not really sure about what happened because most of those narratives had to be told, number one, to other people usually maybe to somebody who owned you.

And number 2, people feel so much shame. It becomes very hard to do. But the one way women have been able to assert ourselves is by telling our stories. Even the first woman who ever did a book of imaginative verse in the United States was Phyllis Wheatley, and for her while she was writing poetry, and not memoir. She was writing about things like what it felt like for a woman when her child died, things that were not discussed in the late 1700s. They were not discussed. Even she, in the very short life she lived, talked about the interior of women's lives during a period of great explosion.

You have the feminist theorist Paula Giddings. She wrote, *When and Where I Enter*. She wrote about the interior lives of women. Audre Lorde was the first person to write about what it meant to live with breast cancer. It was she who wrote about it first, the "Cancer Journals," which is an amazing book. And it was certainly before "First You Cry," which is, who was that? Betty Rollin who wrote about "First You Cry," and we heard about that, but before her, there was Audre Lorde. You have Anais Nin diaries. Memoir is so important, because if we don't tell our stories, somebody else will tell them. If you don't tell it, somebody will tell it for you, and it may not be what you want to hear, so it's in that tradition that I try to work most often, what I've most often done, until my second memoir, and for some of you, you know, the first book I wrote was about the man I married who is the father of my beautiful daughter. Rashid. It was called "The Prisoner's Wife" because I realized then that with 2.2 million people in prison and another 5 million on parole or on probation, the United States is incarcerating more people than anyone else on the planet. We were never hearing from family members, and they feel a lot of shame. You can't go into many families in this country and not find somebody who's been locked up, run into the law, had trouble. You can't find somebody who doesn't do that, but nobody was talking about it. What was it like for the families left behind, and we were all family members left behind.

So that's why I wrote that book, and then Rashid and I married, and in 1999, I got pregnant. We were allowed conjugal visits in New York, and I got pregnant. And I decided I was going to have a baby. I never thought I was going to have a baby while Rashid was away. I didn't want to tell my father. I haven't told my father I'm pregnant yet. The girl is going to be nine. So you know how that goes. I don't know. She followed me home. Papa doesn't know Nisa, don't tell him. But you know, those old, you know, daddy daddies, and I was a daddy's girl, so in any case, I didn't want to but I was 32 years old when Nisa was conceived and I thought I wouldn't have another chance to be a mother. Still, there were fears. Somewhere evident I was an author and freelance writer when I became pregnant, would I find a real job, decent child care, and be able to survive the predicted sleep deprivation? For that matter, would I be able to go through labor with my husband? I worried a lot about what people think. As the child of parents who had been married for over 50 years, what did I look like?

Being black factored into the image piece. Did I look like a statistic? The excoriation of primarily single mothers of color from the mean spirited notion of the welfare queen to the pop culture or reduction of women into b's goldiggers and baby mama's. They pursued me like angry spirits. What the world thought of me mattered perhaps more than it should have, but it did. And I wanted to know that I was loved and claimed, and my child was too. I didn't want to be viewed as a woman who somebody got a piece from and just left. After all the experiences of not being chosen by a man except when I was chosen for violence, I wanted it known that I could be chosen for something more. Walking around New York City streets, then alone, I wanted a t shirt, a placard, anything that would declare that I was not a

discarded woman, the bad girl, the nasty girl. And then there were larger political concerns. For as long as I've been conscious of it, I've done what I could to refuse slipping on a jacket some racist or misogynist has sewn for me. What real way could I fight back? My attempts were at best, pathetic. Painfully, with the aid of lotion, water, and soap, I squeezed my wedding rings on to my fingers. And doctor's offices and literature at the midwifery center, I looked at no one, sat up proudly, made phone calls to my girlfriends. When the time came, I paid for private birthing classes. But I worried most of all about protection. Would I be able to raise a black girl safely in a world that seems only to expand in its ability to hate and destroy? In a culture whose practices from healthcare to policing tip toward death where black people and women more often than not are the stand-ins for the bullseye, would the life of one black girl be honored by anyone other than me? Would my love and honor be enough to sustain her, the constant reports of drug and alcohol abuse among young people, the girls who at eight years old are giving (oral sex) to boys in the schoolhouse stairwells and coming home with STD's in their mouth. The seeming tidal wave of good girls out on the stroll scared the hell out of me. Not because I disliked or judged any of these kids but because I had been my own 80's version of these kids.

Would my little girl be able to do what I was not? When she has reached an age when she too would have to negotiate streets and survival, would she know how to speak to me as I didn't know how to speak to my parents? Would I know how to listen to her? My parents and all of their brilliance and commitment were unable to do that for me. During adolescence, teenage angst became the nomenclature for clinical depression. It would be years before I could name the hurt, try to heal it. Would I repeat that vile pattern with my daughter? After all, I had both of my parents. My daughter only had me. These questions, more than physical challenges of pregnancy, kept me awake through the nights, wondering and worrying, where could I go and live and raise my child safely in 2000? The nightly news reported that the only presidential campaign was the one that was headed up by a man who signed 153 death warrants. I wanted to run, go live off the grid, have my child, tell no one, keep her forever in my womb. But the more round my stomach became, the more these fears fell away. I gave myself over to reason, faith, home and Doctor Spock. I left the shaky financial world and accepted a job as an editor. I made it through labor, I'm told quite easily, although she was two weeks late. When my water did break at exactly 12:01 a.m. less than an hour later, my daughter was in my arms. Seven hours after that, we were home entertaining people.

It all seemed so possible right then, that night, surrounded by friends and food, the love of my husband, my daughter's father, was palpable, however distant. Everyone felt it. Rashid and I laughed so much in those first few days. We laughed and spoke bravely about his parole date, Given all the people we'd seen the parole board turn loose, even as we knew they were still dangerous, we felt a sense of confidence. Again and again, we would go over all his accomplishments in prison, his clean record, the cops who supported his release, and we declared there was no way they wouldn't let him out, especially now with his beautiful girl in the picture. We saw our future. I did not, long before spoken language was the most effective method of communication between us, I would whisper to my daughter about the man I loved, how he was away from us now, but it couldn't always be so. I issued out the dates to Nisa. I called those dates facts. I didn't foresee that all the facts were lies. Every story of every life has its own beginning. That we are ever to properly locate it is, for me, an enduring question, but as best as I can locate it, what I've shared with you just now is the beginning. Our beginning, the one that harks back to the meanest of places, yes, is in the face of it all still one brimming with love and a vision so grand we can believe in it more than anything else, Nisa and I could believe in ourselves. We believe in our hearts, our muscle, our breath. We believe in the strength we call on together, standing, pushing, dreaming, creating all with the determination and force of laborers.

Those wizards whose magical work can turn sand into stone and prisons into pyramids. I'm sorry. That wasn't the last line. I messed up. The last line really says to say, hard work and sand can turn prisons into particles. It was overwhelming, and I still get nervous. That's the beginning, from the beginning of this

book which really goes to talk about single mothers and you know, while my own story has a background that maybe a lot of other women don't share, some do, I think because single parenting is so common now, people think it also must be easy, but it's really more than a notion. And, if anything, I hope that we begin a dialogue about not continuing the useless and pointless, ineffective sort of excoriation of families where there's only one parent but that we begin a real dialogue about what we're going to do about health care policies, for example.

Single mothers, single black mothers are the least compensated people in the world. Why is that? When you have homes where you would think, you have dual income coming in, you wouldn't need as much, but a woman working alone, no money. A lot of women in DC, when I was reporting on a story a few years ago, in the AIDS crisis moved from being primarily a crisis affecting single men, and it became a crisis affecting a lot of single moms, and what would happen, for example, here, is that even the advocacy organizations on the ground were still structured to service single men and not single mothers, so you would find women, for example, not dying of the HIV related causes or full blown AIDS. They'd be dying of malnutrition because the people would only bring one meal, and they would give that to their child. So how do we even begin to think about this? Or that we give a mother only one tray. She's not working, in the advanced stages, they give her only one fare to go on the metro system. And so the women wouldn't go to the doctor because they couldn't leave their children alone. And places like Mississippi, the New York Times reported a few years ago that as a result of the so called Welfare Reform Act that occurred under Clinton, 13 years ago now, as a result of that, hospitals closed down. So you have the exponential increase in the infant mortality rate in Mississippi because women can't get early prenatal care. They had no car, no way go to the hospital. They had no physical way to get there. So I know there are real things that we can do that support our communities, but because they support mothers. There are really important and effective things we can do around day care, and I would hope that in a place like this where you're discussing urban issues, we begin to talk about that. What do we really need to have in place in terms of healthcare, in terms of access, you know, there are so many possibilities about the ways in which we, that people can, you know, become depressed. There's a lot of factors and certainly all the isms factor into it.

So if you're discriminated against because of race or gender, and you add into that you're economically unstable, these are all things that can lead to depression. And yet we don't have a mental healthcare system. And then what happens? The mother gets depressed. She starts to drink, become violent, and we all wind up paying that price instead of on the front end getting in there and saying, I remember being in Cuba many years ago after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, and so what happened in that period was that Cuba wound up having to live on 15 percent of its former GNP. So you have 100 dollars to live on for the month. Now you have \$15. But when you walk through Cuba, it was not easy. Toilets didn't flush, lights flicker on and off. It was not a comfortable place to be. It was not the Cuba I visited well after that when Europeans started going back to it. But one thing that struck me so deeply was that even within that poverty what the government did they set up essential clinics for mental health because they knew people who didn't have a lot to begin with had even less, and if you weren't going to afford that on the front end, what they would have had on the back end would have been more dangerous. I thought, why don't we have that where we just had a guy on TV, looked like a normal, average, everyday father, put a gun in somebody's face and robbed them. He said, I'm sorry. It's on tape. I have to feed my child. I'm going, really? Is this really happening? That normal, average, everyday people are going to pick up pistols and hold up people?

It's not the first story I've heard. The stories of suicide. I can say what it's like as a single mother, you know, to live in a world of shaky finances, to live in a world where the neighborhood is coming undone, to live without health insurance and how terrifying that's been at different moments, to not have the support that I have needed sometimes to take care of my daughter. But there are so many other stories, and I would just, you know, hopefully being here and talking with you is about us saying those stories so

that when we go out and make real policy change, they take into account the voices, the thoughts, stories and everything that's inside all of you. Because if you don't raise your voice, you will not be counted in. They're not looking to have more people at the table anyway. And trust me, they will be happy to leave you off the roster. So with that said, I don't know if anybody has any questions or anything they want to talk about, but yes?

Questioner. I was a single mother for nine and a half years, and I've been married for about a year and a half to a man that is fully engaged. So I have this comparison that I am able to make on a daily basis. What I used to have to do, had to deal with alone. And what I recall is feeling like everything was set up counter to what I needed as a single mother, trying to get my son educated, trying to arrange even aftercare. Schools opened just in time, there's not enough time to get your child to school and get to work on time. So if it's just you, what do you do? There's not enough time to get your child from school and stay at work until you're supposed to get off. Even aftercare, which is supposed to be accommodating, would close before I had time to leave my job and in the worst traffic, third worst traffic in America, get to pick up my son. Do you ever feel like the system is set up not to accommodate single parents?

Bandle. Oh, absolutely. Let me give you something we could change very quickly. I used to get very angry. Nisa, when she was two and a half said, I don't like you. I like children. So I had to get into early childhood education. I was like, really? So I got her into an early childhood education program, and what used to annoy me to no end was that people would have their kids in there sick. And I see, you know, because I would stay. I worked at Essence, I had some more free time and I liked to read to kids. And I would stay, and there would be some little kid just the thing coming out the nose and all it was, you know? And you know what I realized? I had such a privileged thing. I was a writer, I was at Essence, I was upper level, had degrees and what have you, so if, and I had the wherewithal to have a nanny, so she could stay with a nanny if she was sick. But these women maybe got five sick days a year.

Let me tell you about January with children for any of you who don't know. It's a bad month. There's pneumonia happening. Nisa got walking pneumonia twice in one season. You wake up literally from the heat generating off your child's body twice in one season. But I always had the, I had assistance. I had all this stuff that could accommodate me, so I never had to worry about sick days, but if I was working for the phone company in one of those crazy buildings where you can't even get fresh air, you get five sick days a year. If you have 3 kids, what happens? And you don't have, you understand? What happens? You're done. You're done. Or if you go out and you need health insurance, and so in that way, is set up, and it's also the thing is about, there's also a respect factor. It was interesting. I know, I watched the difference in respect that is given when a woman is standing there with a man and when you're standing there alone. And I just had to bring Nisa's school up on charges. She had been bullied, and it's been going on for four years. Serious things, like, I'll shoot you, she's been punched in the face. Crazy stuff. But these are little kids, and I realize the brain is still developing. But I thought, what is wrong with this school that you are not telling the parents this is happening? Nothing. So finally I brought charges, and I realized, you know, when I went into that meeting, I brought my beautiful, strong homeboy, who's been, you should have seen the difference when I walked in the room with him, and he was in this suit, and I was like, this is Nisa's godfather. Now, very different dialogue. Very different dialogue. I mean, I got a dialogue. So even in that way, you know, when you walk in, there's a lot of assumptions that are made. Look at this wacko, the blond hair. Ann Coulter. She just, that's the reason we have crime. So it wouldn't be anything to do with poverty, it wouldn't be, you know, she just went on a whole speaking tour about this where she was blaming single mothers and never looking at any of the policies that don't facilitate, if it takes a village, why don't we act like one? If everybody agrees, it's not meant for one woman to raise a child. It's not meant for two people to raise a child alone. It's not true. Most of us remember growing up and not so much growing up in New York City, but my mother is from the country. And when we would go back to Indiana and to Illinois, every summer growing up, there were people like I knew that they weren't my aunt or uncle, but I couldn't understand, they were something to me. I knew I

could get in trouble by them, and I knew they would feed me and take care of me. It was a very different, you don't have, so the dissolution of that, too, has, you know, there's all kinds of things that have happened.

And here's a policy that starts around 1970. It was the policy that said if you had a man living in the home, you couldn't get welfare. And a whole lot of people moved out. So you had families that were trying to be intact, but because of, people were working. They were the working poor. Living, but they are poor. Being supported by various parts of welfare, but working. And they were trying to get some, but you know, it might not even be everything. Might just be food stamps. They would lose those benefits if they had a man. You know how many relationships that destroyed? That's also concurrent with when we start to see the rise in prison populations. It's not like one thing doesn't feed the other.

Questioner. I grew up with a single mother, and I have a twin brother who got into a lot of trouble, and at one point, she was leaving to go to work, and a police officer pulls up and steps up, and he tells her, without really any introduction, you know, it's you single mothers that are a problem with big crime in this city. And she got really upset. She called him a nasty word and he arrested her. This was while she was going to work. She gets to the police station, and they let her go, but this is just the same attitude that you're talking about, not just in sort of the community but also with people with power, and they're using it. They're acting on this attitude, and I'm seeing a relationship between the institutions that are set up poorly to handle sort of single mothers and the attitudes that people have. And I'm wondering, how do you change one without the other? Because the people who vote and speak and develop attitudes around these institutions, they have this attitude about single mothers. Having grown up in the home, it's ridiculous some of the things they expect her to pull off. So I don't know how you change one without the other. What do you think?

Bandele. What's your name?

Questioner. Shiro.

Bandele. That's a great question. It's something I say a lot because doing the kind of advocacy work that I do, I think a lot of times we seem to make a lot of catchphrases, incremental change and sort of piecemeal doing some policy work. What I know for sure is that you can't actually, you can change policy without doing the other piece. You won't make policy last. So let's look at it like, you can change the policy for whatever reasons of slavery in America. And what do you get if you get Jim Crow, the war on drugs, you haven't changed the idea that we ought to be containing a certain group of people. Because it hadn't been a struggle. Really, what we should be in is a struggle for the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens. Where we all reach down as far as we can and come up with the biggest part of our humanity and everything you do. I do think you can make change, especially now. I was talking with Robert, and I hate the arguments about efficiency arguments, stop doing this when it's costing the state. So what does that mean? You can do it when the state is more flush? It doesn't hold up. So when it comes to things like, you know, single mothers or incarceration, unless you're really getting to the hearts and minds, we can make some healthcare change, right? We can get some insurance. People can right now say, we're not going to have the same kind of sick day policies for single moms. That can happen. But if you're not changing the hearts and minds, it'll just wind up going right back where there'll be some other way that people do it. So I agree with you. And I think those kinds of things happen over dining room tables and in churches, and I think they happen with people we're the least comfortable with, but I think we have to have the dialogue, and wherever we can, we should be forcing it to happen, even when it was uncomfortable, which most of the time, it does for me. I come from very conservative parents who would probably rather I was teaching English. They're academics.

Questioner. In introduction of the midwifery system help alleviate, to reduce, the infant mortality rate in these areas? As far as I understand it, there are not enough doctors and health practitioners, such as midwives, to help pregnant mothers, so that they do not get sick and reduce infant mortality.

Bandele. So, you're asking, would the introduction of a European style, well, I think that Europe is so ahead of the United States in so many ways, number one, and a lot of times with healthcare. I think that what's happening here, and I, Nisa was born to a midwife, I think that what's happening here is that early care is being lost. And if they were, if there were more midwives who could travel about and go, I think there probably would. That probably would help reduce, you know, especially if they were giving women that early care, it would reduce C-sections, which of course elevates the chance of the mother dying. So yeah, I would, I mean, I would agree with that. And I mean, I believe in midwives. The problem then, though, is that you have to get to the insurance company, because they're shutting them all down here. People don't even want to be gynecologists. They don't want to be OB. My GYN is not going to practice obstetrics anymore. She can't afford the insurance. The insurance is \$200,000 a year. Imagine what it is if you're not a doctor, if you're a midwife, what that insurance is. The place where Nisa was born, it was a little progressive, artsy fartsy type place. And now it's shut down. Gone. Can't afford the insurance. So there would have to be a real switch in the way that people perceived midwives, a real switch in the way that people perceived women having their own power, because a lot of it was that. I was going to a doctor up until the 37th week. And I changed doctors five times. Anybody was mean to me, I left. So when I came to the birthing plan, when I come into the hospital and put the IV in, I felt like that orients me toward being sick, not toward wellness, which is what you should be if you have a healthy labor, assuming that you don't have onset diabetes or things.

As soon as I start to take control of my labor process, I clash with the doctor. So midwifery, too, is really about you being in so much control. I think my midwife was with me when I gave birth, she was with me enough to tell me, now shut up and push. They didn't even know, and they were like, it's too soon. And they left me. I was in there with my friends. Did shut up and push, cleaned up the baby, and they were gone. I was home eating takeout pizza seven hours later. That's true.

Dr. Larry Sall. You mentioned the cost of insurance. Would tort reform make a difference?

Bandele. Drill down on that a little bit more for me so I can see how. I've never thought about it through.

Dr. Sall. Well, doctors are sued because people die. And everybody does. But people seem to think that that shouldn't happen, so they sue the doctors and the doctors have to pay out huge amounts of money and to afford to do that, they have to buy insurance, and the insurance companies have to charge huge premiums so they can afford this.

Bandele. Yeah. That's an excellent point. I never even thought of it. When you were saying tort reform, I was thinking about the insurance companies. But I think if there were limits, and we've certainly done this before on how litigious people can be, and I think there should be that. There should be protections built in, because that's what happens. I have a lot of friends who are doctors, and you know, the, what, it's a litigious people can be. We've seen them limit all kinds of ways for folks. And I do think that would help very much. Are people discussing this at all now? They are? Because I hadn't heard that discussion. That's a good one. You should write an op ed for the Times. It's insane what people think. You can sue about anything. And there are serious mistakes that are made, and for those, there do need to be, you know, absolutely, but there are things like, as you said, the one thing you know you're going to get out of this life is dead. So we all will. Any other questions?

Questioner. I have a brother who's been in and out of the penal system most of his adult life, and raised in the same house as me, so we don't understand it. We've tried to provide support, various ways. He's in his late 30's and has really not made a turn yet, a significant one. But one thing that I've experienced as trying to be part of his support system, is there seems to be an inherent, whether conscious or subconscious, assumption that criminal behavior or something thereof is, is what to be expected of black men. So as a result, there doesn't seem to be the push to support us as his support system to help him get to where he needs to be. And have you, do you think you've experienced that? Where it seems to be a systemic, probably unspoken and subconscious assumption that the statistics that you quoted, or it was Tim, I think, who talked about the amount of, do you think maybe one of our obstacles in our country is that there is some sort of subconscious assumption that that's just how we are, so it's a reflection of the nature of the culture and therefore there's not a push to do the things that need to be done to reform?

Bande. Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. I think it's true about how black people see other black people. I think if you have constant images, which we haven't helped, you look at some of the hip hop images that are out there. You see the boy with the pants all down. This is like something that comes out of prisons because they took your belt away. And if you look at the same people, like look at Martin Luther King at 29. Brim, sharp. When did grown men, I see 35-year-olds looking like they're 18. What the hell is that? I don't understand that. And when I look at men throughout, we would never, so I think that yes, there was that we see ourselves in that way, so it goes back to the earlier question, like what we're really in a struggle for and it is hearts and minds. Think of most people, tell the truth, close your eyes, what is the picture of a killer. Close your eyes, who do you see? What's the picture of a rapist? I mean, what is somebody that looks like a welfare queen? We don't come up with a lot of the people in Appalachia or the Hasidic community in Brooklyn where I live who have nine kids and are on welfare. We don't come up with those images, but they're true.

But it's what gets portrayed to us and what we ingest from the news, what we choose to watch. I'm strict with Nisa about what she watches. And I know times it's frustrating to her. And I don't let her be whatever she wants to be on Halloween. There's limits. And there's limits for a reason. There's reasons I take Nisa with me where I go. There's reasons that, you know, she's doing this and not, you know, I have friends who play anything they want. You know, on the radio, in the house. We play Barney or whatever. Now it's Hannah Montana or whatever, that madness. But you know what I mean? But BET doesn't play in my house. It doesn't enter my house. You know? I'm angry at King magazine, and it's right there on the stand for everybody to see. So what's the image of a ho? I think that's absolutely true, and I think we have to challenge it absolutely everywhere we go. And, even if it makes people uncomfortable, and it usually does, but it works. But unless we make that demand that says, not on my watch, Nisa will tell you. We will be anywhere in Brooklyn, and kids will start talking real fast and nasty and loud, and I'll be the one going, excuse me, you don't see my shorty right here? You can't do that.

And you know, it's like, you know, you just have to put people in check and put your own self in check so we're not ingesting these images and counter signing them through silence.

Questioner. I actually have a question. My mother is white, comes from an upper middle class background, and she did when she went to college, she left, found her a black guy, went to the country, lives on the wrong side of the tracks, was ridiculed for it in that environment, and then was brave enough when the situation went sour to come back home and be the only one in her family to . . .

Bande. With her little brown baby?

Questioner. Yeah. And now, I'll be 30 next year, my brother is 14 months younger than me, and at 17, he was homeless and a full blown crack head. He's been in the system three times. He just got out the third time, and this time was a substance abuse facility. And he's still struggling to get it together, and

when I look at my mom, I can look back and see, she broke her back to raise us. She did everything that she could do. And a lot of times she did it on her own because she felt like she had too. But to this day, there's a guilt, a heaviness that she carries. And it doesn't matter what I say to her or do for her, it's like she can't accept that she was a good mother or that she did the best that she could do, but I can look back and see times where he was 12 or 13, and he would get in trouble, and she would call the police department and say, what can I do? And they would say nothing. Or I remember her calling big brother and saying, he needs a role model. But because her mentally ill brother lived with us, we couldn't get help. What advice can you give me as a single mother to encourage my mom and bring her up?

Bandle. Bless your heart for saying that. Whenever I need my greatest advice, I go to my mother, and my mother always raised me to believe that guilt is a useless emotion. It doesn't fix anything, doesn't instruct. It's a useless emotion. It will not change where your brother is. It will not change, you know? So it's useless. There's nothing we do with that. You know, what we always say when we do drug policy reform work is drug abuse and misuse and use in general Doesn't discriminate. Our policies do. There's all kinds of reasons why people choose to harm themselves or be self-destructive. And one thing that any, I'm sure. How many parents are in here today? Do any of you seriously believe that you are the only influence on your child? I mean, you know, I just want, so you remind your mother of that. We would love to think that. Do you think that Nisa would know Hannah Montana and the Jonas Brothers? I would play her a Bob Marley song, she said, I like Hannah Montana. It's really true. I could remember when Nisa came home somewhere around 3 with some horrible song, that shake your booty or whatever it was wasn't appropriate for a 3-year-old. And I was like, where are you learning this? And I realized I'm standing here on the street corner, and the guys come by bumping that noise. No matter what I do at home, it's still kids are sponges. We don't know who else influenced your brother. We don't know what he hasn't shared with your mother.

Questioner. And she sits back here, and she goes, what did I do?

Bandle. What did he do? He's a grown man. He is a grown man now. Yeah? So what is he going to do? It's not about what she did. What is he, you can have the worst mother in the world. It was a very good book to read, too, help me out with it. John Edgar Wideman, "Brothers and Keepers." Just Google this author, and he goes on to become an amazing author, and his brother is in prison. But it's brothers something. 25 years since I read it or something like that. But it's a great book and I think that would be very helpful because she asks some of those questions. Because it's not about, what did I do then? Because people do have parents sometimes who are terrible, and they still push through and sometimes redevelop a relationship with that parent who maybe was abusive, if the parent heals so it's about what are we going to do now? Guilt becomes useless because it keeps you back here. Let's go forward now. If she's still abusing drugs and abusing himself, what are we going to do? How do we support him as a family structure? And there's no way. You tell your mother, call her tonight, and say, what did Joe Biden do wrong? His daughter was just busted doing blow. What kind of friends are taking pictures of people, by the way? But Joe Biden's daughter, just busted. Bill Cosby's daughter. There's no formula for this. You do the best you can. You pull the people around you, and sometimes he kid is going to do right. Do you think my parents, my parents were deans of universities. When I said, I want to be apoet when I grow up, do you think that's what they wanted? They were like, good Lord, we'll never get rid of this child. So that's not what they wanted. They assumed, I graduated high school at 15, they thought I'd have a Ph.D. at 22, and they certainly didn't think I'd come home and say, I married somebody in prison. I was not raised for that, I can assure you. So parents have some influence, but so do many other things. The guilt is not going to get your mother where she needs to go, and it won't help your brother. What it should be is, where are we going to go now? We want him restored to health. We're done? We're done. Thank you.

Dr. Bray: Many thanks. She's going to be around. We're going to be around for about another half hour or so. Her books are available from the bookstore outside. So if you want a signed copy, we can do that. Dean Sall has a presentation for Asha.

Dr. Sall: This is the beginning of a long, fruitful relationship, I hope, and if this is a sample, my God. Hard to beat it, I'll tell you that. But on behalf of the library, we'd like to present this to you, this is a certificate signed by all the members of the library staff in gratitude for your presentation today.

Ms. Bandele: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Tom Koch: And then we want Tim in one of them.

Ms. Bandele: Nisa, we'll have to move south. We don't get this hospitality. Thank you so much.

Dr. Bray: For those of you who don't get enough of her in the next 30 minutes, this evening there's a community reception in South Dallas near Fair Park. If you know where UTD central track is, it's the Arts and Humanities facility. We're right down the street, 813 Exposition at the Lounge. So come and have some fellowship, we'll see you there. Please sign up for our list, and we'll let you know when our next events are.

Man: There's still food over here.