



Kin and Kids program fills missing parent gap in Utica

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UTICA — The words Bright Beginnings loom over the walkway to the Neighborhood Center.

Tisher Scarborough is the first to arrive, and soon three women come in and hug Scarborough in turn. They have not seen her since the last meeting before the holidays.

The conversation rambles, touching on various aspects of the women's lives before getting to the reason why they are there — for the children.

Kin and Kids is the name of this support group, and while they may not be the biological mothers to the children they are raising, they are relatives serving as primary caregivers, which can sometimes be a daunting task.

For Louise Chestnut, that means playing the role of mother and father in addition to that of grandma.

When her daughter died, it left her caring for her grandchildren when the father proved unable to pick up the burden.

Chestnut has tried to guide them into their future in addition to giving them a better way to cope with their past.

"I instill the word of God in them, we pray together," Chestnut says but adds as an afterthought that it isn't always easy. "He did blame God for taking his mother," she says reflectively of her grandson.

"Now you've got another mom. I'm your mother and father right now, I'm going to take care of you," Chestnut tells her three grandchildren.

At Chestnut's behest, Scarborough explained the custody side of how the program works.

Scarborough's daughter lost custody of her baby when it was born with methamphetamines in its system.

"Kinship is where they took my daughter's kids away from her and gave them to me," she said. "These kids are not toys. You've got DNA for all of them. That's your kid."

One of the hardest parts for Scarborough has been teaching the children to respect the other people they encounter, no matter what the other person says or does.

"These kids, they deal with a lot of stuff, but you got to respect adults," she said. "You have to talk to your grandmother, you can't correct adults. Let your grandmother correct adults."

While they may not grasp the full details of their family's situation, the day-to-day difficulties of their lives and school often are emotionally frustrating for the kids.

"It could be 10 years from now, they're still going to be feeling what they're feeling," Scarborough said.

Her solution to keep them out of trouble is to make sure they are socially active in school activities and any community programs that are available.

"The more programs you put them in, the less you got to worry about them hitting the streets," she said.

Terri Salisbury, who helps in leading the program, spoke to the assembled women.

"We want families to come here together," she said. "Being involved, talking to them on a daily basis — they want to know you're listening to them."

As the meeting ended, Chestnut spoke candidly to the group about making a brighter future for her grandchildren.

"I'm glad I came, thank you Jesus," she said.