

Trying to Shed White Image, U. S. Navy SEALs Reach Out to Black Males

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
Thursday, 14 June 2012 00:00



Americans have heard about them on TV news and seen them featured in movies. Yet most people don't even know whether they've ever met one in real life.

They are portrayed in the media as secretive, rugged, and brave. In recent history, they are credited as the stealth fighting force that took out al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, the master mind of 9-11.

Now, in 2012, members of the U. S. Navy SEALs, are on another special assignment. Their new mission? It is to save the lives of young Black men in cities across America.

"I volunteered to assist the scout team in this endeavor because I personally enjoy empowering young men and bettering their lives through leadership, teamwork and mental toughness," says Senior Chief Joseph Jones, 43, a Navy SEAL. "I consider their background and I tell them right up front, I'm going to talk to you about mental toughness, but believe it or not a lot of you already have been dealing with mental toughness as I had dealt with coming up."

Jones, a St. Louis native who has spent 24 years in the Navy and the past 10 as a SEAL, which is an acronym for Sea, Air, and Land, was raised mostly by his grandparents and spent only a few years with his father.

"It was kind of a broken home. I meet a lot of kids who have similar backgrounds, which helps

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me to identify with them,” he said in an interview.

The statistics are all too familiar. Each year, thousands of young Black men across the nation are killed or wounded by gun fire in the streets. They are disparately incarcerated and high school drop outs.

When not ducking and dodging trouble, many must duck and dodge the police as Black males are often racially profiled and unfairly targeted for brutality. In school systems, they are met with disparate suspension and expulsion rates, labeled with emotional problems, learning disabilities or met with just plain low expectations.

It is a minefield of sorts that many are born into. Some excel despite the odds. Others become casualties of the social warfare.

Jones and about seven other SEALs make up a team of predominately African-Americans who, for nearly two years, have tried to put a dent in the statistics. They have spent time in the crime-ridden neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Houston and Atlanta conducting “fitness challenges” and giving inspirational talks to middle and high school students and young adults who they hope will redirect hardened perspectives and change the directions of their lives.

“Bringing to light and giving them the tools that they already have and showing them that the same thing that they use to make it through those tough times are the same things they can apply to being successful in life if they funnel that energy in the right direction,” Jones says.

Females are also encouraged to participate in the fitness challenges, but are not allowed to be SEALs because of U. S. military policies against women in direct combat. A description of the “SEAL Brotherhood,” found on their website, www.sealbrotherhood.com, portrays Navy SEALs as follows:

“We are the ultimate combat brotherhood. In the sea, air and land, we gather intelligence where others fear to tread. We find and conquer our enemies anywhere in the world. As the SEAL

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Brotherhood, we're trained to be confident, determined, and able to operate seamlessly as a team. We dedicate our lives to make every mission a success by ensuring every SEAL is well trained and successful. Confident, successful young men are important to the morale and well-being of all communities."

According to a news release, the SEALs Brotherhood program does the following:

Empowers youth with SEAL tools and mental toughness techniques to face and overcome the challenges they confront in today's fast-paced world.

Provides young men and their communities memorable experiences.

Taps into the competitive spirit of individuals and encourages the "never quit" attitude

Invites ALL to challenge their own limits!

Despite the positive work clearly being done by Jones and others, the U. S. Navy SEAL organization has internal issues of its own. Jones is one of only 50 African-Americans out of 2,500 Navy SEALs.

"People ask, 'Well, why is that?'" Jones recounts.

He points to the study-based fact that many African-American children shy away from water and swimming and take those inhibitions into adulthood. But, he concedes it's also a shortcoming in outreach and awareness.

"You can't aspire to be something that you have no idea what it is," Jones says.

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Navy Public Affairs Specialist Scott Williams agrees. He says the racial makeup of the Navy SEALs is around 85 percent Caucasian and the rest are racial minorities.

“For African-Americans, it’s pretty low, only about 2 percent enlisted and 1 percent officers,” he says. “This is one of the things we look at. We look at our force and we realize we really need more diversity if we’re going to be a strong force. And we haven’t done a good job in the past of reaching out to minority communities and letting them know about the opportunity to have a career in the Navy SEALs, so that’s part of our objective.”

As is the case historically, when ever given an opportunity, African-Americans meet the challenge and soar. Williams describes an event last month with the Montgomery County Sports Academy in Maryland:

“We had a SEAL fitness challenge there that the participating kids from four different high schools in the area, they were training for several weeks under the auspices of the sports academy specifically for that event,” he recalled. “Some of them had never even swam before, didn’t know how to swim. And by the time we had that SEAL fitness challenge, they were able to make laps in the pool. We thought that was a pretty cool thing.”

The mission of the new SEAL Brotherhood program, which officially launched May 30, is not to recruit, but simply to inform, Williams says. “Our mission is really just about awareness, information, assistance...We don’t bring anybody into the Navy, literally.”

Jones is not a recruiter and shuns implications that his sole mission is focused on bringing more Blacks into the SEALs. But, describing the SEAL training as “the toughest military training in the United States Military, perhaps the world,” he expresses hopes that the time he spends will erase at least some of the mystique and impart some of the positive attributes for whatever the students ultimately decide to do.

“I think the most impactful thing is when they hear my story and they see that, hey, I was no superman before I went out for SEAL training,” he said. “I was a regular person just like them and they see that a regular person with a complex background like they have can make it. They

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understand what mental toughness is. I think that is impactful in terms of them applying this to other things they are trying to do or accomplish in their lives.”{jcomments on}