

# Meet Wanda Boone, Durham's social justice and resilience warrior

Fighting inequity with memory, faith and friendship

By Tenley Garrett

You will often hear in life, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” When Wanda Boone moved to Durham 47 years ago from a small town in New Jersey, she faced a social landscape painted by stark inequity and racial dissonance. Coming from Teaneck, New Jersey, where her social circle embodied ethnic and racial diversity, and discrimination was nearly non-existent in her immediate vicinity, Boone landed in Durham with somewhat of a jolt.

“I didn’t come from a foundation of people being separate,” said Boone.

The divide in her new community was apparent enough.

“It didn’t feel to me that people spoke and engaged with each other outside of their comfort zones,” she said. Looking to make a change as an African-American woman, she had her work carved out for her.

Boone and her husband have been working with children and young adults since the 1980s, when they led workshops teaching life skills to individuals coming from public housing and low-income backgrounds in Durham. Boone became concerned by what seemed to be a lack of employment opportunities and the correlation she suspected existed between unemployment and substance abuse in the community. Her deep concern for the role substances — like alcohol, prescription medications, marijuana and opiates — played in individuals’ lives from as young as 9 or 10 led her to investigate a possible correlation between childhood trauma and substance abuse.

“Adverse childhood experiences



**Wanda Boone is the founder and director of TRY (Together for Resilient Youth), which addresses issues of substance abuse and preventative measures for Durham's youth.**

**Photo Credit/Tenley Garrett**

*“Resilience is a way of living so that, when a negative or challenging situation arises, you don’t fold.”*

**Wanda Boone**

and resilience are at the foundation of how we treat substance abuse,” Boone said: “Resilience is a way of living so that, when a negative or challenging situation arises, you don’t fold . . . the mind may forget, but the body remembers,” she said of the profound impact traumatic childhood events can have on a person later in life.

Boone’s interest in ACEs (adverse childhood experiences)

stems from her own trauma as a child, something she preferred not to share in print.

“My life inside the home was not what was projected to the outside world,” she said.

She took an ACE test to determine how she ranked in terms of childhood hardship, and scored a 9 on the scale from 0 to 10. The test has been developed to draw correlations between substance abuse, addiction and childhood trauma, and Boone says a score of 4 or higher characterizes someone as “very susceptible” to developing negative or dangerous behaviors later in life.

“If you have 4 or more ACEs and can’t fix it, you’re stuck,” she said of the ACE test.

Having experienced trauma herself at the age of 7, how is it that Boone has come to live a stable life? Most notably, her life has been marked by a 30-year career as a senior research specialist and executive director at Duke

University Medical Center, where she worked until 2002. Now, she directs the TRY (Together for Resilient Youth) program to combat substance use and protect Durham’s vulnerable youth through prevention strategies.

Part of the answer lies in holding on to positive memories or influences in her life from childhood and allowing them to sustain her through difficulty. More specifically, she believes that adults are more likely to combat their ACEs if they had somebody early in their life who was “absolutely crazy about them” — someone who would cheer them on and support them in anything. Someone who would be by their side when everyone else jumped ship.

For Boone, it was her grandmother.

“When my grandma was on her deathbed, she brought me in and said, ‘Wanda, you’re so smart. You’re really gonna be something one day,’” Boone said. “Know

what it is you believe in and hold onto that — don't let anyone take that from you," she said of her grandmother's words, spoken to her at age 5.

Her grandmother's empowering words stuck with her in times of doubt and discrimination. While doing medical research on babies born with metabolic disorders at Duke University back in the '80s, Boone was encouraged to seek a promotion by the professor for whom she was conducting research. But it was obvious to Boone that her skin color (and perhaps her womanhood) held her back. The professor pressed harder on her behalf, and she eventually was granted the well-deserved promotion.

"Even in the midst of racism, inequity, and the horrors of not being accepted, I realized the people in my life who opened doors for me," Boone said of that pivotal event in her life.

In 2003, Wanda Boone founded Together for Resilient Youth, otherwise known as TRY, and today it boasts a 48-member coalition consisting of youth, parents, community members from the 5 Durham Districts, public schools, church ministry, higher education institutions and more than 400 business representatives, among others. While the network of support and strategic action is complex, the message is simple:

"This is literally about loving people," Boone said.

## Drugs in Durham

The national average for high school students using drugs without a prescription is 10 percent, yet in Durham it is nearly 15 percent.

With her network established and still growing 15 years later, Boone has no lack of support in times of need. "If something needs to get done, there's a way to get it done," she said of the overwhelming support she's received in the community.

"If you're talking about prevention in Durham, you can't leave out Wanda Boone," she said with a smile.

The TRY mailing list reaches 8,000 recipients, a number that continues to grow. While the national average for high school students who use drugs without prescriptions is just under 10 percent, the average in Durham is roughly 15 percent, a startling statistic. Clearly the growing interest in TRY's outreach programs reflects increasing concern for young people who are using substances as early as elementary school.

Some approaches to intervention in young peoples' lives are remarkably simple. Boone shared an example of a "hope jar," where

a jars are placed in different public schools throughout Durham as a means of psychological support and a morale boost for young people when they need it most. In the jar lie dozens of tabs of paper with words of affirmation printed on them; when a child is having a hard day — whether due to bullying, problems at home, negative self-talk, thoughts or other factors — they can reach into the jar and pull out words of encouragement.

"I'm called to minister to hurting people," Boone said, "to people who are lost and have lost their way in life. I believe that's done through my faith in God, in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit."

Though Boone and her husband are both pastors, she prefers not to mix her ministry with her work at TRY.

"I demonstrate my faith rather than talk about it," she said. "Faith becomes my inspiration — faith is to be lived, demonstrated through my unconditional love."

And her demonstration has made an impact bigger perhaps than she's even aware of today.

Remember that she worked with her husband in the '80s in life skills education for people of low-income and public housing backgrounds? There was one 9-year-old girl at Oxford Manor, a public housing community in Durham, who would remember Wanda Boone many years later when she walked into a Durham school board meeting just over a

week ago. Perhaps in her mid-30's today, the woman approached Boone and told her she was now employed and happily married with three kids, one of whom attends college.

While teaching at an alternative school in Pittsboro, NC, a 15-year-old boy cursed Boone out when she began working there, wondering what business she had at his school. Despite his resentment for her, Boone, with a bright smile on her face, once told the boy after school on a Friday, "I look forward to seeing you on Monday!" When Monday came, the boy approached Boone and asked, "Why did you say you looked forward to seeing me on Monday?" It seemed odd, he told her, that she seemed to know that he had planned to take his own life over the weekend.

Today he's 31, married and has three children.

What does all of this mean to Wanda Boone today then, when all is said and done?

"This work really is for a lifetime," she said. "You need to demonstrate to young people that you're in it for the long haul."

Want to learn more about what TRY is doing in the Durham community? Follow them on Facebook!