

# From pandemic to promising: My Sistah's Keeper program buoys Annapolis women through a tough year

By Danielle Ohl  
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Demesha Tasker, who recently moved from Newtowne 20 to a townhome in Odenton, participated in My Sistah's Keeper this past February and is now back in school for social work, Tuesday, April 27, 2021. (Paul W. Gillespie/Capital Gazette)

Two weeks before the pandemic hit, Ron-Shaye Clark got a call.

An Annapolis performing arts venue wanted to host her student production of “The Wiz.” She’d already put out the calls for auditions in January, chosen a cast and picked her co-director, an affable 14-year-old named Camarin “Peeboo” Wallace. Everything was coming together.

Then, COVID-19’s first infection in Maryland became dozens of infections. The after-school program Clark runs at the Pip Moyer Center shut down. Everything shut down, halting “The Wiz” before it really began.

Then, in July, the unthinkable happened. Camarin [died after someone shot him](#) on the playground near his home.

“It was one of the biggest hurt points in my life,” Clark said, “because I eat, live and breathe for these children.”

In a nearby neighborhood, Demesha Tasker sat with her own life-altering news. In January, she gave birth to her fourth child, but her celebration would be short-lived. Within the month, Tasker learned she had a rare form of uterine cancer. Within the next two weeks, she had a hysterectomy.

She started working from her home at Newtowne 20, trying to take care of her newborn, worrying about whether she'd still be around to see him grow up.

“I became very depressed, very distant,” Tasker said. “Life was over, at the moment, for me.”

From her home just down the road from Tasker, community activist Toni Strong Pratt woke up from a dream. In it, she found the calling that would connect these three women and others together and create a support system as the coronavirus pandemic strained the public systems meant to assist residents in their time of need. The result was My Sistah's Keeper, an eight-week program designed to give women the tools and skills to identify and reach their goals, be they financial, emotional or spiritual.

Pratt, a lifelong Annapolis resident, has spent her adult years advocating for people who grew up in her city. A Black woman, she saw women who reminded her of herself, raising their kids, paying the bills, trying to protect their families and communities, and she saw them doing it alone.

“So many people pull things and want things from us,” Pratt said. “But there's nobody really here to walk things through with us.”

Program participants, like Clark and Tasker, are paired with mentors like Michelle Jackson. Jackson is a single mother whose entire life changed when her son was born with special needs nearly 29 years ago.

In January, Jackson came down with a severe respiratory illness she thinks could have been an early case of COVID-19. In July, she lost her job as a senior administrative coordinator at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine due to pandemic cuts. But in the most unlikely of times, she and other program participants said they found direction through faith in God, but also themselves.

[Pratt, who is now running a second bid for Ward 4 alderwoman](#), started MSK in September with 15 mentees and 15 mentors, all women she knew from her work and life in Annapolis and many from the city's public and subsidized housing communities. It is run in cooperation with Co-op Arundel, a nonprofit that obtained \$15,000 in grant funding through the City of Annapolis.

The women met eight times over eight weeks, every Saturday. During one class, Pratt stood at the front of a community room at the American Legion Cook-Pinkney Post 141 wearing a blue blouse and a serious look.

“When we put nothing into this program, we will get nothing back,” she said. “So whatever you want to reap from this program, that’s what you sow.”

The women sign a contract that dedicates them to come back for every session during the eight weeks, which hosts a different professional facilitator to teach financial literacy, emotional health, conflict resolution and other topics. The first class is an intense, self-introspection session to help break down internal barriers that might be holding the women back, Pratt said.

At the start of both cohorts, women were behind on their rent. They lost their jobs. If they kept jobs, they didn’t have the technology available to continue from home. But of the 27 women who have graduated from the program so far, some have gone on to pursue higher education. One woman is in culinary school; another is studying to be a hairstylist. One is learning to become a paralegal, with sights on law school. Many have moved out of subsidized housing.

And many have the renewed motivation to pursue their goals. Of them are Clark and Tasker.

On an April night in the Pip Moyer Center, Clark held a rehearsal for “The Wiz.” Wearing a black mask and a sweatshirt emblazoned with the acronym MEGA, and she helped students from across the county go over their lines. MEGA, which stands for “manifesting every great achiever,” is a new program Clark is registering as a nonprofit organization with the help of her MSK training.

The program pushed her to press on with the production, she said. That and the incessant texts from the kids who call her Sister Mary Clarence after Whoopi Goldberg’s character in “Sister Act.”

“I just want to get these kids something they didn’t get to have last year,” she said. “Bring some light to the city. We can overcome anything. I call it ‘The Wiz: From pandemic to promising.’”

In February, Tasker, her husband and their children moved from Newtowne 20 to a townhome in Odenton, where she’s resumed online classes in social work. The rarity of Tasker’s cancer left her confused and scared. Tasker said she rushed her kids, trying to prepare them for the worst, trying to make sure they knew how to drive in case her cancer killed her. She felt ashamed of her diagnosis, she said.

During her second class with MSK, a shaky doctor’s report popped up on her phone. Results of some recent scans were discouraging. Fear flooded Tasker’s body, but she told her mentor about the report. With the support of her sisters, she went for some additional tests. The results were steady; the prior report was just a flare-up.

Through the program, “I’ve learned to deal with it a little bit better,” Tasker said. “Not panic so much.”

“This year has definitely been an eye-opener. As a community, we really need to come back to supporting each other.”