**The Other Wes Moore, Community Module**

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Pre-reading Activity

Divide the following three scenarios between various groups.  Have them read the passages and discuss how they would handle the situation.  Then, choose a scenario for each group to come up and role-play in front of everyone.   Discuss as a whole group what they learned and thought of the activity.

*Scenario #1*

You are on your way home from school, when another friend approaches you with a sly and clearly up-to-no-good look on his face.  You know he is up to trouble, but are always interested in what he has to say.  He walks up and asks you to check out what is in his backpack.  Inside, there are several cans of spray paint, bright and colorful, ready to be used.  He asks you if you want to go tag some apartment buildings behind the alleyway. This kid is always the popular leader because he constantly is challenging authority; he is also frequently in and out of jail and a known "runner" for drug dealers.  What do you do?  How should and could you handle this situation?

*Scenario #2*

Your older brother is someone you have always admired and looked up to, but he isn't always honest.  Many times he will take money out of your mom's purse and look for opportunities to steal from other people.  One day, while you two and a bunch of his friends are hanging out at the mall he suggests that everyone just go into the popular clothing store and take whatever you can get and run out.  He argues that since there are too many of you to watch or catch at once, the store clerk won't know what to do and everyone should be able to escape without problems.  You don't want to look scared in front of all his friends, but they also don't treat you very nicely either.  Most of the time, they make fun of you and ask you to do all their little errands.  How do you get out of this situation?

*Scenario #3*

Girls are often vindictive towards one another when they feel threatened or disrespected by other girls.  There are always "cliques" of girls at school who watch each other, waiting for any reason to fight or cause trouble with one another.  One group in particular is eyeing you because you are friends with a boy they like.  They give you threatening looks and bump into you when they walk by.  You don't belong to any group and just want to be normal and stay out of trouble.  Who do you talk to?  How can you avoid getting further involved or dragged into a no-win situation?  What can schools do to help prevent bullying and create a safer environment?

Key Concepts

Choices, accountability, responsibility, peer pressure, bullying, parenting

Discuss what each key concept means. Ask them to give examples of when these concepts are part of our lives. What are the opposite definitions (antonyms) of each word?

Reading

Read aloud the following passage from *The Other Wes Moore* (pages 79-84), pausing to ask a few questions at key parts of the text.

Some of the most important lessons I learned, I learned from the streets. I learned about girls getting periods not from biology class but from my friend Paris. I learned the realities of gang violence not from after-school specials but when my boy Mark got jumped and beaten down for wearing the wrong color jacket. And I learned that cops were smarter than I thought on the corner of Laconia Avenue.

I was rocking my Olaf’s basketball shorts and Syracuse T-shirt on an unseasonably warm Saturday in October. I’d always wanted to go to Syracuse like my uncle Howard and play basketball for the Orangemen. I was to find out later that I wanted them a whole lot more than they wanted me. We’d just finished playing a game of basketball and were leaving the courts when out of the corner of my eye I saw Shea, one of my friends from the neighborhood. Shea was my age but shorter, with reddish hair and light skin, light enough for a spray of freckles to shine through. I broke off from my friends and walked over to him—we met halfway and greeted each other. I asked him what he was up to, and he said confidently, “Nothing, just finished working.” I checked out his gear: black jeans, a white tank top, and a black backpack. Work. I knew exactly what that meant.

*Question: What does he mean by “work”? What kind of work do you think he is doing?*

Shea was a “runner,” an entry-level position in any drug enterprise. A runner was the one who moved packages for local suppliers who needed to make drop-offs for the street-level dealers but didn’t want to carry the weight themselves. Kids like Shea were used because they were less conspicuous, and less likely to be stopped by police officers. Shea was making decent money, but ever since he started “working,” we’d seen less of him.

Shea and I sat in front of the Cue Lounge, a bar and billiards club whose façade was painted black. The Cue Lounge sat next to a Kentucky Fried Chicken and an hourly-rate motel. Cars whizzed by as we spoke. We were checking out the black wall of the lounge, which was plastered with spray-painted tags. Some were recognized as friends we knew, and others from other walls around the neighborhood. It seemed as if everybody in the hood had their own nickname and tag, some more elaborate than others. Even me. Mine was simple: a “KK” with a circle around it, standing for Kid Kupid, an alter ego I assumed to advertise my largely imaginary prowess with the young ladies. I had redecorated a few corners of the Bronx with it.

*Inference: What does Wes mean when he says, “I had decorated a few corners of he Bronx with it”? Why does he give himself a nickname?*

As we started at the markups on the wall, admiring the work of some of our contemporaries, Shea reached over his shoulder, pulled the backpack in front of him, and slowly unzipped it. I quickly looked inside. Beside a small bottler of water and a white headband were two spray-paint bottles, one with a white top and one with a blue. He looked at me with a sly smirk.

“You wanna tag?”

I couldn’t say no. *(Pause and ask, “Why couldn’t he say no?”)* First off, Shea was one of the most respected young hustlers in the neighborhood. He was a worker, we all know that—and while some of the kids were smart enough to be disgusted by what he did, other kids, even the ones who weren’t in the game, respected his position. Plus, I loved throwing my name up on a wall; it felt like splashing in the shallow end of the criminal pool.

*Question: Explain the simile, “It felt like splashing in the shallow end of the criminal pool.”*

I scanned the streets for cops and nosy neighbors as I reached into his bag and pulled out the can with the white top. My eyes continued to scan as I shook the can, making sure the contents were mixed so that the paint would come out even and clean, creating a crisper result. Once I felt the coast was clear, I began, first drawing the connected Ks and finishing with a wide circle around them, my custom style. I placed the can back in Sheaf’s bag, satisfied with my work—and our speed. Seven seconds and done. I had added my indelible mark to Laconia Avenue, a testament to the world that Wes Moore lived—or at least Kid Kupid did. Nobody could ever deny I was there. Not even me as a police cruiser rolled up around the corner.

*Wuap, wuap!* The distinctive sound of the police siren rang out. Shea and I looked at each other and then sprinted off in different direction. Foolishly, I headed right past the policy car; it took one of the officers seconds to wrap me up and throw me against his vehicle. Shea at least had a shot. I saw him sprinting off in the opposite direction. He turned around, saw me being patted down, and realized my escape had lasted a mere four steps. He tried to speed up, but seconds later, he too was wrapped up by a policeman. As I lay on the hood of the car, with the officer’s hands pressing against every part of me, searching me, I watched Shea twenty feet away on the ground getting the same treatment.

My uncertainty about what to expect ended when the officer reached above my head and began to pull my left arm behind my back. Now I understood where this was going. I was being arrested.

“Chill, man, I didn’t do anything!” I began screaming as I tried to wrangle my hands free.

“Stop resisting,” the officer warned as he cuffed my left wrist and roughly pinned down my flailing right arm.

The relationship between the police and the people they served and protected changed significantly during the 1980s. For almost as long as black folks have been in this country, they’ve had a complicated relationship with law enforcement—and vice versa. But the situation in the eighties felt like a new low. Dugs had brought fear to both sides of the equation. You could see it in the people in the neighborhood, intimidated by the drug dealers and guns, harassed by the petty crime of the crackheads, and frightened by the sometimes arbitrary and aggressive behavior of the cops themselves. On the other end of the relationship, the job of the policemen, almost overnight, had gotten significantly tougher. The tide of drugs was matched by a tide of guns. The high-stakes crack trade brought a new level of competition and organization to the streets. From my supine perch on the back of the police car, I noticed an older woman staring at me, shaking her head.

After he finished cuffing me, the cop opened the rear door of his cruiser and pushed my head down while shoving me into the backseat. I was terrified. I had no idea what was next. A thought raced around my head—my mother was in a strange place. My desperation for her support was in constant tension with my desperation for independence and freedom. I projected apathy about her feelings, but I wanted nothing more than to make her proud. In other words, I was a teenager, deathly fearful of disappointing her but too prideful to act like it mattered. Now I was afraid this incident might turn my only stalwart supporter against me.

*Questions: What is your relationship with your parents/guardians? Do you agree with Moore’s description of teenage feelings?*

Loneliness enveloped me. I felt my fate suddenly twinned with that of Shea, an aspiring drug dealer who I knew didn’t really give a damn about me. My friends seemed far away, and in that instance I became aware of the contingent nature of my relationship with my crew. We loved one another, but how long would we mourn the absence of any one of us? I’d seen it happen a million times already, kids caught out there in one way or another—killed, imprisoned, shipped off to distant relatives. The older kids would pour out a little liquor or leave a shrine on a corner under a graffiti mural, or they’d reminisce about the ones whoa were locked down, but then life went on, the struggle went on. Who really cared? Besides my mother, who would even miss me?

My eyes watered as I sat in the backseat of the cruiser, watching out the window as the two cops picked Shea up off the ground and led him toward the backseat with me. Shea winked at me as he walked up to the car with his hands behind his back.  *Is this dude serous?* I thought.

The car door opened, and She was thrown into my lap. “Stupid jakes, man,” he coolly stated as he straightened himself up.

“Yo, shut up, man! We are in serious trouble! I can’t go to jail, man,” I was almost hyperventilating.

“Just say you didn’t do anything. Just say you don’t know what they are talking about,” Shea said.

I looked out the window, saw the two cops searching Shea’s bag with the spray-paint cans, and realized that Shea’s strategy was one of the dumbest ideas I had heard in a long time. Even I, who could come up with an excuse for everything, was at a loss for a good one in this situation.

The cops stood outside for what seemed like forever, discussing our fate. *Predict: What will happen to Shea and Wes?*  I wanted to ask Shea if he had any of his “work” inside the bag too but decided against it, feeling it was better for me not to know. In fact, I didn’t even want to talk to him. I wanted to wait in silence.

One of the officers, a stocky Italian with jet-black hair, moved toward the passenger side of the car and opened the front door. He folded himself in and looked back at us over his left shoulder. Shea and I sat silently, me with wet eyes and a look of uncertainty, Shea staring back with cocky, smug indifference. The cop turned back around and began to write something on a clipboard. Finally he looked back at us and said, “What the hell are you thinking?”

Almost simultaneously, Shea launched into his brilliant “It wasn’t us” story while I loudly attempted to overrule him by apologizing profusely. When we were done with our overlapping monologues, we glared at each other.

The cop shook his head and pointed his right index finger in our direction. “You kids are way too young to be in this situation. But you know what, I see kids like you here every day. If you don’t get smart, I am certain I will see you again. That’s the sad part.”

He paused and looked into our eyes, searching for a reaction. Mine were probably filled with tears. I was wincing because the handcuffs were beginning to hurt my wrists, but I was also sincerely fearful about what was going to happen next. And the self-righteous look on Shea’s face was starting to piss me off. I’m sure in my outlaw fantasies I would have been defiant as Shea, but something about this situation had soured me on romantic rebellion. It may have been the moment when the officer finally pulled my second arm behind my back and tightened the handcuffs. In that moment, I became aware of how I had put myself in this unimaginably dire situation—this man now had control of my body; even my own hands had become useless to me. More than that, they had control of my destiny—or at least my immediate fate. And I couldn’t deny that it was my own stupid fault. I didn’t have the energy for romantic rebellion—the possibility of losing all control of my life was like a depthless black chasm that had suddenly opened in front of me. All I wanted to do was turn around, go home, and never find myself at this precipice again for such a stupid reason. Kid Kupid! What was I thinking?

*Assessment: How does Moore’s reasoning sound? Does he make sense of this situation? Is he genuinely sorry?*

The cop opened his car door, allowing himself out. The other officer began to move toward his side of the vehicle. Within moments they’d opened the back doors. The officer who’d been lecturing us reached in and gabbed me by the shirt until could get a good grip on my shoulder and pull me out of the vehicle. As I cleared the door, he stood me up straight, and I noticed the same happening with Shea on the other side of the car. The officer reached down and, with a quick turn of his wrist, the cuff on my left wrist opened up.

“I hope you really listened to what I told you,” he whispered in my ear, opening up the other cuff to let my both of my hands free.

“Yeah, thank you,” I replied as I rubbed each wrist with the opposite hand, trying to ease some of the pain of the metal handcuffs pressing against my skin.

“All right, guys, the bag is ours. Now get moving.”

Shea looked as though he was about to start protesting to them about keeping the bag until I grabbed him by the left arm, telling him it was time to get moving. We began to walk back down Allerton Avenue, turning around every few seconds to s see the cops, who were still staring at us. The cops gave us a gift that day, and I swore I would never get caught in a situation like that again.

A week later, Kid Kupid was on the loose again, adding my tag to another graffiti-filled Bronx wall.

Post Reading Discussion Questions

Ask the youth their thoughts and feelings about this passage. Can they relate to it? What did they learn? What would they do in this situation? Why doesn’t Moore stop? Why doesn’t he learn his lesson? What does he need to do to change his life?

Two Voices Poem Activity

Listen to the following song “Father and Son” by Kat Stevens and follow along with the lyrics on your hand out. Mark passages that stick out, write your thought, feelings, and emotions as you listen to the song in the margins. Write a short response to your overall feelings to the song/poem on the space below. Then, list a pair of people that often are paired together (IE father/son; mother/daughter; student/teacher; cat/dog; etc) and write a conversation that the two of them could have together. Follow the format of Kat Stevens as your guide.

Father

It’s not time to make a change,   
Just relax, take it easy.   
You're still young, that's your fault,   
There's so much you have to know.   
Find a girl, settle down,   
If you want you can marry.   
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy.   
  
I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy,   
To be calm when you've found something going on.   
But take your time, think a lot,   
Why, think of everything you've got.   
For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not.   
  
Son   
How can I try to explain, when I do he turns away again.   
It's always been the same, same old story.   
From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen.   
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away.   
I know I have to go.

Father   
It's not time to make a change,   
Just sit down, take it slowly.   
You're still young, that's your fault,   
There's so much you have to go through.   
Find a girl, settle down,   
If you want you can marry.   
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy.   
(Son-- Away Away Away, I know I have to   
Make this decision alone - no)   
Son   
All the times that I cried, keeping all the things I knew inside,   
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it.   
If they were right, I'd agree, but it's them They know not me.   
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away.   
I know I have to go.   
(Father-- Stay Stay Stay, Why must you go and   
Make this decision alone?)