



WASHINGTON (NNPA) - The last time we saw Jermaine Crawford, his hair was an unkempt mess and his face was riddled with the pains of a drug-addicted homeless teenager. That was some 10-months ago when Crawford closed the storyline for Duquan “Dukie” Weems, his character in the final season on the critically-acclaimed HBO crime drama, “*The Wire*”.

Crawford has been up to a lot since the lauded cable show's closing music followed his fictional character and his unhappy ending into the darkness of an alleyway full of junkies.

Today, the lanky 6'1” teen actor is clean cut. His wide-eyed face tells a different story. He's hungry. Not having eaten all day, Crawford buries his face inside the menu of a hip bohemian restaurant called Busboys & Poets, in Northwest Washington, D.C. He's trading menu suggestions and inside jokes with his mother, Wanda Crawford, with whom he has a very close relationship.

They settle on buffalo wings and Maryland crab cakes before talking about a new documentary film project that has him working on the opposite side of the camera.

"My character really motivated me," Crawford said. "My character was homeless. No one was really there for him except for his friend [Michael Lee]. His parents sold his clothes for money..."

After spending the *Wire's* last two seasons playing the fictional abandoned youth named Duquan Weems, Crawford thought it was time that somebody told the story of the "real Dukies" of America.

Teenage and Homeless in America: Change is Gonna Come is, as the title suggests, Crawford's documentary about teenage homelessness. The one-hour television project will focus on the lives of five young "sofa surfers"- kids who live anywhere they can lay their heads.

"The idea to do a documentary came up not long after the show ended," he said. Crawford said that he and his management team were exploring the young actor's different post-show opportunities. He thought it would be interesting to document the lives of teens who really had to go through what was scripted for his character.

"[Being in Baltimore,] we were actually filming the show in a place where a lot of people go through this sort of thing," Crawford said.

Many of the documentary's subjects, whom they refer to as “the five heroes,” will parallel Dukie's hard knock upbringing. But, unlike the HBO show, these kids have yet to face the anecdotal dark alleyway.

“The way we selected our five [subjects] was when we were listening to their stories we tried looking at their hearts,” said the Mitchellville, MD native. “We just went with the most touching

stories.”

In order to find his “five heroes” Crawford dug deeper with his research- starting with a simple Google search and ending at the Sasha Bruce House on Maryland Avenue in Northeast Washington.

The Bruce House, which is operated by Sasha Bruce

Youthwork, is a renowned short-term emergency shelter for homeless and runaway youth in the DC area. After Crawford's mother talked with Sasha Bruce Youthwork about what her and her son wanted to do they agreed to open their doors to support the project.

“There was a room full of kids and we just talked. They gave us really powerful

stories,” Crawford shared about the sorting process. “It's astounding because people actually go through these types of things, and the *Wire* was just a description of what people go through.”

The five that Crawford and his production team selected include Derek, a 17-year-old that has

dreams of becoming a fashion designer, but abuse from his schizophrenic mother has driven him to different shelters and drugs, which he uses and sells to support himself. Derek's only escape has been his art and design.

Eighteen-year-old Stewart

is another young man being profiled that uses art to break away from his abusive childhood.

Stewart said the abuse in his household was so bad that it made him “numb to emotion.” After finally running away with his younger brother, Stewart turned to rap as a way to deal with his pain. He

sees rap as a way to tell his story to the world.

A third hero is Vincent. With his father having been murdered and his mother strung out and incarcerated, the 16-year-old lives on the street because he has no

place permanent to go. He robbed and sold drugs to get by but after getting shot in a botched car theft, Vincent wants to become a truck driver just so he can see the world beyond his unforgiving streets.

Being 16 himself, Crawford is able to relate to the teenagers he's documenting.

"It's like, I'm the same age as these guys," he said. "All it takes is one mistake, one slip up and I could be right in their

position. Kids are one mistake away. Parents are one pay check away. It's not impossible to end up in their situation. And so, I'm just really grateful.”

The National Runaway Switchboard estimates

there are between 1.6 and 2.8 million runaway and homeless youths in America. The non-profit also estimates that one out of every 260 homeless youths will die due to drug overdose, murder, illness or suicide.

Reasons why youth become homeless vary. But the The Young Adult Guidance Center, an Atlanta-based youth outreach organization, states that the root causes fall into three distinct yet interrelated categories - family problems, economic

problems and
residential instability.

According to the
organization's website,
“Many homeless youth
leave their homes after
years of physical and
sexual abuse, strained

relationships, addiction of a family member and parental neglect.”

“When you see somebody and realize that could've just as easily been you it's very humbling,” said

Crawford. "It's like a wake up call. It's like, 'That could have been me. That could have been my mom or dad on drugs.'"

Crawford is counting his blessings that he

is even getting entrusted with a production budget. He's even gotten a nod from noted Hollywood veteran Nigel Nobel to take the lead in this project. Nobel, who serves as the

documentary's
executive producer, is
an Academy
Award-winning film
and television
producer and director.
He lends instant
credibility and
direction to the upstart
project- direction in

which Crawford
latched onto
wholeheartedly.

"I prepared myself by
listening to the
producer, Nigel
Noble, and following

the pointers he gave me,” Crawford said. “I really just tried to follow his direction and absorb the things I've learned as an actor on the opposite side of the lens.”

He envisions making impact on the lives of people. “I just want to be rested so I can be full of energy and full of life so I can motivate people around me.

That's really what I want to do as a director and an actor. I've always wanted to be that person that brings the best out of people."

His mother added:
"This documentary
isn't just to expose
these kids and their
situation. But
rather, if you lend a
hand you can help
them. It's just not
the kids' journey,

but it is also
Jermaine's journey
and responsibility to
help these children
get to the next
level...I always
taught Jermaine to
be grateful for what
you have. Life isn't

just about what you
can get, but what
you can give. And
with this
documentary,
Jermaine has to
give himself."

Spearheading a documentary is time consuming. Jermaine balances the demand of Hollywood with the demands of being a teen, which means making

time for school.

He's

home-schooled,
which gives him
that flexibility to
manage his time.

A graduate student
from the University
of Maryland comes

in and teaches
Jermaine his
curriculum. His
mother stays at
home and works
as his manager.
"It's a full-time job,"
she said about the
workload her son's

job requires. “With acting, typically you'll only get a day's notice for anywhere you need to be tomorrow, so, it's very demanding. Jermaine's dad

and myself, we believe in his dream a lot. For a parent, the most beautiful thing in life is seeing your child reach his dreams. It's demanding, but

we're willing to
make the sacrifice
for it."

Crawford's mother
said that it's a
challenge raising a

child actor
because the
entertainment
world has a way of
making kids
adults.

“Like when you go check into a hotel, you go check in under Jermaine Crawford's name. It has a way of forcing adult

things on you.
And sometimes
we have to say,
'Jermaine, you
have plenty of
time. Don't rush
your life. Enjoy
where you are

right now, and
what you have.'
We keep him
humble that way."

Despite all of his

successes as an actor and now as a young, budding film-maker, that humility comes out in his honesty as he enjoys life and experiences

all the real life
lessons that
come as a teen:

When asked if
now that he's 16

if he's purchased a car, Crawford said: "No. I failed my permit test."

Chuckling and speaking playfully in teen colloquialism, he concluded, “I won't be buying no car no time soon. I have to

go retake my
test."