Outrage, dismay, sadness… As our community mourns the death of another young life gone too soon, I imagine we have each experienced some or all of these emotions. The murder of five year old Nizzel George, while he lay sleeping on the couch, pierces our hearts and souls much like the untimely death of little Terrell Mayes, Jr. six months ago. My heart and sympathy goes out to the families.

To myself and to the community at large; the leaders, the politicians, the educators, the preachers, the funders, the organizers, the activists, the workers, and the watchers, we must ask.. has anything changed? How could this happen again? Sadly, the reality is not much has changed. Many of us begin the year vowing not again, not in our community, but what power do we have to halt a retaliatory gunman? These questions have been heavy on my mind the last few days. As a leader of a full service non-profit based in North Minneapolis, I'm challenged to figure out what more can I do. What more can we do to strengthen our community. Our charge is vast and there is a call to do more.

A Brewing Crisis

A recent Pew report revealed that the wealth gap between Blacks and whites had widened even further. What was once a 10 times as much wealth gap is now 22 times as much. We can ride all around town and see the impact of the housing crisis, the education crisis, the safety crisis, the health crisis on the lives of everyday African Americans. For many of us we don't even have to leave home to see how the gap works and to know that there is a true crisis in our community.

Minding the Gap

The frequently referred to "Minding the Gap Report" published by the Itasca Project shares its findings on quality of life measures and future implications here in the Twin Cities. In this report, Brookings Institute researchers wrote "In spite of our overall economic strength, there are three stark and growing socioeconomic gaps in the Twin Cities – gaps tied to race, class, and place – which threaten to undermine our region's future. Closing these gaps now is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do."

Those of us involved in any aspect of human development work cringe when we hear the word gap, as we know all too well that those most in need are the ones tumbling through these cracks. At the Minneapolis Urban League, that is who we work with, “gap people” those individuals who are hovering over the gap, desperately trying not to fall in; people who deep within their souls still have hopes and dreams, still yearn for an opportunity, ponder when they allow themselves to consider possibility, what their lives could be if only given an equal chance. Some suffer in silence while others act out their pain and feelings of hopelessness by falling prey to desperate choices such as crime, violence and a variety of ills.

The Hope for the Cure

There is hope. People of color are primarily people of faith. We must not lose sight of this. We must hold on. We must continue the good fight. We must continue to make a difference.

The leaders must continue to be innovative, energetic, resilient and inspiring. The politicians must continue to enact fair and equitable policies that strengthen families and our community. The preachers must be the torchbearers of hope, save souls and bathe the community in a spirit of faith. The funders must fund with a level of generosity that sustains and propels. The educators must continue to equip our children with the lifesaving opportunity a good education provides.

The organizers, the activists, the workers, and the watchers cannot allow our youth to continue to fall in the gap so you must continue to march, to protest, to move, to bring attention, and to keep the hope for a cure for the sake of our children.

The great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that a man can’t ride you unless your back is bent. I believe that the death of young Nizzel George is a clear call to action for the leaders, the politicians, the educators, the preachers, the funders, the organizers, the activists, the workers, the watchers and the families to stand up – to straighten our backs for the good of our community and for the future of our children.