

Mama Shu Transforms Grief into Glory and a Blighted Neighborhood into an Empowered Community

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- See how channeling grief from tragedy and adversity into positive action can be an opportunity for both personal growth and to make a difference in the lives of others.
- Be inspired to live with dedication and firmness of purpose in striving towards a goal, despite skepticism or challenges.
- Appreciate the role that a supportive, nurturing, and caring environment plays in empowering excellence—whether that's a family, a school, or a whole neighborhood.
- See the power of creative thinking in devising new approaches and solutions to difficult challenges.
- Explore the importance of generosity in building more resilient and thriving communities and recognize their own capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of others.
- Appreciate solidarity as a key factor in community building by working in unity with others to address shared challenges.

Highlighted Virtues and Character Traits

Caring - to help others; a caring person lives with empathy in trying to understand another person's situation, compassion in desiring to help others, and then with generosity in acting to help

Citizenship - the duties, rights, and privileges corresponding to a person being citizen of a state or nation; the desire to make his state / country a better place

Compassion - feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Creativity - the ability to think of new ideas; to come up with new approaches for accomplishing a goal or solving a problem

Determination – firmness of purpose; complete commitment to achieving a goal

Generosity - giving freely of our own possessions, time and/or talent.

Heroism – a person who is regarded as a model due to their acts of courage, or nobility of purpose and noble qualities.

Resilience - the ability to recover from, or adjust to change and difficulties; choosing to use setbacks as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Solidarity - unity from a shared common purpose and / or interest; active loyalty within a group; mutual support within a group; being present with others

Leader Introduction:

Today we are diving into an inspiring story of resilience, compassion, and citizenship that was featured as one of CNN's 2023 Hero of the Year award nominations. After Shamayim Harris, affectionately known as "Mama Shu", faced the tragic losses of both of her sons, Mama Shu transformed her grief into a powerful force for positive change. Let's watch how Mama Shu is revitalizing her struggling community in Highland Park, Michigan, creating what is now known as

“Avalon Village”—an entire neighborhood transformed for the purpose of education, innovation, and community empowerment.

Lesson Video:

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/16/us/detroit-real-estate-safety-education-sustainability-opportunity-grief-cnnheroes/index.html>

Leader Summary:

The film does an excellent job showing us how Mama Shu was able to clean up and revitalize a neighborhood through creativity and determination. However, the film does not show us how she has paid for all of this! According to another article about Mama Shu, the money for her first properties came from her income tax refund check and her personal pay from being a school administrator, and she then raised money from donations, and even sold fish sandwiches in her neighborhood! It took 8 years to refurbish the first four lots, and her work has expanded to 45 properties –and it’s not over yet. As she mentioned in the video, she has plans to purchase the rest of the property on Avalon Street to build a cafe, a greenhouse for farm-to-table cooking, a laundromat, a wellness center, and to build additional housing.

Mama Shu and Avalon Village are a beautiful example of the profound impact one individual can have on their community when they channel adversity into positive action.

Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)*

Before beginning our discussion, let’s read over the virtues and their definitions, found in the online lesson as a separate document.

1. Highland Park, Michigan, as described by Mama Shu, faces significant “blight.” Blight means a deteriorated condition. Many of us have seen and may even live in these areas, with rows of vacant rundown houses, closed up businesses, graffitied walls and littered streets. While many people just move away when this happens in their city, Mama Shu decided to be the change her community needed. She said, “I was devastated about what I would see walking around. As a citizen, I wanted to live in a beautiful city. I wanted flowers, I wanted beautiful grass, I wanted thriving businesses. I felt that is what we deserve.”

Mama Shu used the word **citizenship** in her statement. What does Mama Shu view as her duty as a citizen?

(To improve her community, and in her case, by helping to make it beautiful, to help children and to help businesses succeed)

What are some of the specific ways that Mama Shu added beauty and resources within her community?

(the Homework House, giving resources to children for education, gardens both for beauty and for purpose, cleaning up streets and houses, empowering local businesses, street lamps to deter crime)

Can you think of ways that we can help, even as young people, contribute to the success of our own community and practice good **citizenship**?

(Support local businesses, plant gardens, help people maintain their yards, come up with ways to improve the beauty of our schools, being kind to others, not causing harm to a community through graffiti or littering)

2. Mama Shu spoke about both her grief in losing her first son and her inspiration to turn around Avalon Street saying, “It was devastating to lose him, but the next day when I woke up, I was like ‘Oh my God, I actually lived through this.’ I needed to basically change grief into glory and pain into power. I tried to transform it and make it into

something bearable and something beautiful...It helped me to heal. It was something to do everyday. The grief is energy to move forward.”

What virtues does Mama Shu show in trying to transform her grief and pain into glory and power?

(resilience, determination)

Do you think Mama Shu’s mindset and actions can serve to inspire others who are facing challenging situations in their lives?

Let’s look closer at the virtue of **resilience**: “the ability to recover from, or adjust to change and difficulties; choosing to use setbacks as an opportunity to learn and grow.” Let’s share some examples of when we have been **resilient** when faced with a challenge? **This is also a journal writing option below.**

3. In what ways does Mama Shu’s story reflect the virtue of **creativity**?
(Mama Shu wasn’t boxed in by what her neighborhood was at the time of her son’s death, and instead came up with an entirely new vision and concept for what her neighborhood could become.)

What are the specific examples of the **creative** ideas Mama Shu came up with and has built within Avalon Village?

(Goddess Marketplace to empower business owners, STEM lab to empower students and both being built in shipping containers, building the homework house to feel like a “home”, selling things to save money to finance her mission, seeing the power of physical beauty to help people come together and experience greater pride in their community)

Do you think we focus enough as a community on being creative in coming up with new ways to approach challenges?

What are some challenges in our present community and school where you think we can try to be more creative? Let’s add to the discussion some initial new ideas and approaches in addressing those challenges.

4. Mama Shu joked that people in her neighborhood thought that she was crazy for buying the block and attempting to transform it, but that they just didn’t see her “crystal clear vision” of what it could be.
Often, when people come up with a new and creative approach to a problem or challenge they face skepticism and even criticism. What virtues are often required when we face doubt from within ourselves or from others when striving towards a goal?
*(**Determination** in having a strong sense of commitment and firmness of purpose in striving towards our goal; in the case of community work, a strong sense of **citizenship** in wanting to improve something in our community that motivates us to keep going)*
5. What financial concerns did Mama Shu face in purchasing her first lot for Avalon Village? How did she overcome these initial financial obstacles and how is she still raising funds?
6. It took 8 years to clean up the first four lots that Mama Shu purchased, and even after that she is buying more because there are so many things she wants to build for her community. She has been working towards Avalon Village for 17 years now and wants to continue to build. In the film, what did we learn motivates Mama Shu to continue her work?
*(Mama Shu **cares** deeply for others from the children who she wants to help by*

providing them with a beautiful place to do their homework to adult small business owners who she wants to empower by giving them a beautiful space and environment to sell their products)

What lessons can we learn from Mama Shu about the rewards of living with **determination** and staying committed to working towards a goal over an extended period of time?

7. How has Mama Shu's **generosity** positively affected the lives of people in Avalon Village?
(safe & inspiring places for children to do their homework, tutoring, counseling, opportunities for people to come together with a sense of joy and belonging, fighting crime with better lighting, providing people with business opportunities to provide for their families, giving people produce)

Let's share some ideas on how we can live with **generosity** to make positive changes in our own community?

8. Mama Shu empowers many of the people in her community, both by supporting small, local businesses of women in her area at The Goddess Marketplace and by giving children in her neighborhood opportunities to learn and grow at The Homework House and the STEM lab. Let's discuss the people in every area of our lives and institutions that nurture and empower us.
(Encourage a discussion of family members, coaches, teachers, charitable groups, religious groups and peers.)

Why do you think educating children and providing opportunities for others is important to Mama Shu? Why should education be important to us?
(Mama Shu said that education is important because it gives children in her area a "fair playing field" to pursue their own hopes and dreams and she wants her community to thrive.)

9. One of the sellers at the Goddess Marketplace said, "(Mama Shu) is like the neighborhood super**hero**. She pours her heart out to the community and strives to be of excellence and a standard for all." Reflecting on Mama Shu's actions and impact on the community, do you think she fits the definition of **heroism**? Why or why not?

What do you think being excellent and setting a "standard for all" means? How does that align with the characteristics of being a **hero**?
(*Part of being a hero is being a model for others and a person who strives for excellence often inspires others to be their best, even in small everyday activities of life, as well as in pursuing larger goals.*)

10. **Solidarity** is a key part of Mama Shu's endeavors in uniting her community. What are some of the challenges that Mama Shu and most of her neighbors faced that helped to unite them?
(*blight, poverty, crime*)

How did Mama Shu and her neighbors unite and work together in solidarity to address these challenges?
(They dedicated time in volunteering and helped raise the funds to revitalize their neighborhood)

11. Mama Shu's parting words in the video were "People always think that you just can't do it, (but) yes! You can. Start where you're at. You deserve beautiful things that other cities have, you can change your environment."

Do you agree with Mama Shu, and especially her emphasis on starting small and making positive changes from right where you are now?

Let's discuss some simple ideas on ways we can improve our community from where we are today?

Journal Writing Options:

1. Write about a time when you faced a challenge, and how with determination and even creativity you overcame or learned how to constructively adjust to the challenge.
2. Write about a current challenge or obstacle in your life and how Mama Shu's story speaks to your approach in striving to positively engage the challenge.
3. Mama Shu believes that everyone deserves beautiful things in their community. Describe what a "beautiful community" means to you and how it would impact the people living there.
4. Write about a time when you faced skepticism or doubt from others regarding your ideas or goals. How did you respond, and what lessons can you draw from Mama Shu's determination in the face of criticism?

Extended Activity:

- Arrange students into groups of 2-3. On a device, allow students to read the summaries for the other nominations for CNN's 2023 Hero of the Year Award.
Link: <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/world/cnn-heroes-top-10-2023/index.html>
Students can also google "Meet the people who are making the world a better place CNN" to find the article

Have each group choose one of the other hero nominees that they think is inspiring. Ask each group to give a presentation where they tell the hero's story, including why they chose that nominee, why they think that nominee's work is important, and what virtues they think the story highlights.

- In one of the articles about Mama Shu, she mentions how after she purchased the first property, she drew up her vision of what Avalon Village would become. Share this with students and have them work in groups of 2-3 to draw and design their own "Avalon Village," complete with the resources and buildings they think would be good for their community. Each team should also create a list of the steps to make their vision a reality.

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