April 4th, 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His life and untimely death is an example of a lifetime filled with faith and abundant in purpose and vision, transcending personal ambitions.

The Bible points to God’s desire for human beings to live an abundant life. Personally, I would like to live an abundant life and want that for members of my own family and for all people connected to Little Lights.

Yet, I think few people find it. The assassination of Dr. King was so tragic for the country and for those who care about equality and justice. However, I believe Dr. King’s example shows us the way to a truly abundant life, a life that points the way to the kingdom of God.

As we reflect on this 50th anniversary of his death, I pray that God would help all of us to discover what Dr. King discovered, a vision of beauty and a purpose so meaningful that he was willing to give his physical life for the fulfillment of that mission.

Little Lights is about the good news of Jesus. It is this kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in—and that Dr. King envisioned and dreamed about.

I was especially honored earlier this year on Martin King, Jr. Day when Georgetown University selected me as the recipient of the John R. Thompson, Jr. Legacy of a Dream Award, which was presented to me at the Kennedy Center. What a humbling experience to even be associated with Dr. King and legendary coach John Thompson, Jr. who grew up in public housing in Southeast, DC and became a renowned coach and civil rights activist.

Little Lights will be partnering with Georgetown University for an entire year and receiving ongoing support from the school through free classes in nonprofit management and in the business school for our senior staff. We will be partnering with the University in numerous other ways, as well.

I am grateful to all those who have supported, prayed for, and nurtured the vision and mission of Little Lights over those many years. In 2018, we are more committed than ever to be a light and a source of hope in our city.

A Truly Abundant Life

If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.

– Martin Luther King, Jr.
What was your first impression of Little Lights?

My first time visiting Little Lights was on a Wednesday during Girls Night, and I remember being so amazed by the volunteer and staff's energy, compassion, and faith. From there, I began to know the girls. They made me laugh and challenged me spiritually every time we met, so I knew I wanted to stay involved.

What motivates you to continue volunteering in programs like Girls Night and the Mentoring Program?

I can't imagine my life in DC without the girls from Little Lights. In the DC world, there's so much pressure to be focused on yourself and prioritize what is best for you. But if for one hour a week I can show these girls that they are a priority to someone outside of their peers, then my prayer is that God would use my one small offering in His bigger plan for their lives to demonstrate their value and worth. I remember being amazed in middle school when older women would spend time getting to know me. It made a huge impact in my life.

What made you want to mentor a student at Little Lights?

Becoming a mentor after being involved with Girls Night was a very natural step. Mentoring opens the door to getting to know one girl really well, and also inviting her into my life. What I didn't expect was how much I would connect with my mentee. I identify with many things that she is working through, and it's truly a joy to be able to walk alongside her as she journeys to become the incredible woman God has made her to be!

What would you say are some of your strongest beliefs about our cause?

I strongly believe that God has always been working in the communities that Little Lights serves, and that Little Lights has the unique privilege of being involved in His kingdom building work. There are so many nonprofits that seek to fix, change and move on to the next funded project. Little Lights seeks to remain faithful and does so through lifelong relationships, which is what ultimately transforms everyone involved.

Kayla and Deniesha, now in 7th grade, were paired together through Little Lights Mentoring Program in 2016. They have cultivated a deep, personal bond by hanging out one-on-one and even withstanding one of life’s toughest obstacles together - losing a family member.

How has your relationship with Kayla motivated you over the years?

It’s mostly through school work. It’s motivated me because I can stay positive and true. I can tell her what’s going on in school and I don’t have to worry about her looking at her phone while she’s with me or being uninterested in what I have to say.

Can you remember one moment where you were sad and Kayla brightened your day?

When my mother died, and pops gave her my number so she could call me and text me to support me. That was a really hard time because you lose your loved one and they’re gone forever and you can’t see them no more unless you go to their burial site. Even that will bring back memories, so she was there with me during that time.

What is the nicest thing you’ve ever done for Kayla?

I invited her to my Winter Showcase because I play the clarinet, so I asked her to come see me perform. She enjoyed it! I like giving her hugs, too.

If you could give Kayla a piece of advice, what would you tell her?

I would tell her when life gives you lemons squeeze them, like squash them. What that means is when life gives you problems and you don’t know how to deal with them or don’t want to deal with them, squash it and make it something beautiful like lemonade.

What is one thing you want Kayla to know?

Thank you for being my mentor and for always being around to support me. You’re not boring. Just throwing it out there so she knows! You’re joyful, a good listener, you give good advice and I enjoy spending time with you!
LITTLE LIGHTS is often associated with its high-quality programs for children and youth. But also central to Little Lights’ mission is helping adults find gainful employment through our Family Center, so they can move out of the cycle of poverty.

Established in 2010, the Family Center was born out of a desire to holistically support entire families within DC’s public housing communities. One of the ways we do that is by empowering adults with the tools to become self-sufficient, like high-speed internet, a computer lab, resume help, workforce development programs, trainings and other essentials like diapers and clothing—all of which are provided through the Family Center at no cost.

In 2017 the Family Center assisted 43 adults in finding jobs. Jalone and Sheila were among that number.

Jalone found a job, after nearly four months of unemployment.

Growing up in Potomac Gardens, Jalone is very familiar with Little Lights programs. He faithfully attended our after school programs and summer camps as a kid. His younger siblings, Jaron and Makala, are now attending programs. But after his high school graduation he found himself utilizing Little Lights for a very different reason: to look for a job.

Jalone is another adult who found herself utilizing the Family Center a lot, especially because it is located in Potomac Gardens, just a short walk from her apartment door.

Since September 2017, Jalone has worked part-time, alternating between being a cashier and stocking Trader Joe’s inventory during the overnight shift.

“With the Family Center being here I feel like I can do more for myself. Working at Trader Joe’s is not enough for me. It’s just another step, a stepping stone to open up more doors for myself,” Jalone expressed.

Even through Jalone is working now, he still visits the Family Center regularly to check in with Linda and access helpful resources. “Things that I don’t have at home, like a computer, I know I can use at the Family Center,” Jalone said.

“I hope he’ll continue on this path,” Linda said, offering some additional advice to him, “No matter what is going on around you focus on your life; be determined to keep moving forward.”

Creating Access to STEM

Students learn to build websites & more in new tech class

I n January Devon Alshine, a Homework Club volunteer who works for Microsoft, started a computer course at our Potomac Gardens Center. He is currently teaching three middle school girls the basics of computer programming with the hope of helping them both express their creativity and gain a real understanding of what the field entails.

While STEM-focused learning has grown in popularity over the last several years, it is not always equally accessible to everyone. Students who live in underserved communities like Potomac Gardens, Hopkins, and Benning Terrace public housing lack access to some of the basic resources necessary to foster an interest in STEM, like laptops, computers, and even access to the internet.

To help bridge that gap is a Little Lights volunteer named Devon.

Devon hopes to cultivate an interest in STEM among Little Lights’ students and expose them to the broad range of things they can do with computers, no matter what careers they choose.

“One of the things I’ve noticed,” Devon said, “is a lack of basic understanding and navigation around the computer... it’s such a big skill these days, no matter what job you go to you’re probably going to have to touch technology.”

As jobs utilizing technology continue to rise, we are excited to see students at Little Lights being equipped for future career opportunities, whether in STEM or otherwise.

Although Devon and Josh have focused their lessons on rigorous topics like web development and coding, they always encourage students to have fun while learning. “I didn’t want to turn it into a school class,” Devon said, “I wanted to try and make it more fun. When you teach them something that they like or when they get to be more creative, you see them a little bit more excited about it.”

Students who live in underserved communities... lack access to some of the basic resources necessary to foster an interest in STEM...
Public housing. While the term is familiar, most of us probably only know the stereotypes about it: “poor” and “black” and “urban.” But what is the deeper story? Why do those associations exist?

For more than two decades Little Lights has worked in public housing communities and we believe it is key for all of us to understand how public housing came to be—and that story is a complex one, marked by decades of government-sanctioned discrimination.

It started in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, when America faced growing numbers of impoverished people without adequate housing. President Franklin Roosevelt introduced his New Deal efforts to help combat the economic turbulence of the era. Two of those initiatives particularly shaped the creation and evolution of public housing.

With the Housing Act of 1937 Roosevelt allocated funding to state and local governments to build affordable housing complexes, the first instances of public housing. By 1940 at least 500 public housing complexes were in progress or completed. Initially, many middle and lower class families of all races utilized public housing.

Since the 1930s America has witnessed a vast and growing disparity in wealth between white households and African-American households: this is due to a whole host of factors—housing discrimination is one of the main players.

The diversity found in public housing at the start soon disappeared, however, as white people were given access to greater housing options through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), founded in 1934. The FHA lowered interest rates and down payment requirements, allowing a significant number of middle class Americans to purchase homes—white Americans, that is. African-Americans were denied these opportunities through a practice called red-lining.

From its start the FHA utilized a color-coded system to distinguish which neighborhoods were eligible for investment. Green neighborhoods, those prioritized by the FHA, were described as “homogenous,” while red neighborhoods, where the FHA refused to extend loans, were described as containing a high concentration of African-Americans, an “undesirable population” as they termed it.

Redlining spread beyond the FHA to become a widely used standard throughout the mortgage industry. Block-busting and contract selling also became prevalent predatory practices, which contract sellers would instigate white flight to the suburbs, buy the homes whites had vacated, and sell them where contract sellers would instigate white flight to the suburbs, buy the homes whites had vacated, and sell them.

Not surprisingly, then—stripped of economic agency and isolated in impoverished areas without access to quality education or decent jobs—many African-Americans slipped further into poverty with public housing becoming one of the only viable options.

With the passing of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, discriminatory housing practices were made illegal, yet the ramifications of decades of discrimination extend to today.

Since the 1930s America has witnessed a vast and growing disparity in wealth between white households and African-American households; this is due to a whole host of factors, however our history of housing discrimination is one of the main players. Across the nation white households have an average net worth 13 times greater than African-American households. In Washington, DC that number is even more staggering with white households possessing a net worth 41 times that of African-American households ($284,000 vs. $3,500).

This wealth disparity is why in 2017 DC public housing had a wait list 47,000 households long—and why 91% of those households are African-American.

In the Potomac Gardens, Hopkins, and Benning Terrace public housing communities, where Little Lights focuses our efforts, families of four exist on between $12,000 and $14,000 per year—roughly 17% of the median DC income.

Today most people look at public housing and see two options: Get rid of it or get people out of it. At Little Lights, we believe there is a third option: To acknowledge the value of these communities, invest resources into them, and restore them from within so that people can thrive where they live.

To Deepen Your Understanding:

- The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson
- “How Red-Lining’s Racist Effects Lasted for Decades” by Emily Badger via The New York Times
- “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates via The Atlantic
- “The Mantle of Other Selves” by Isabel Wilkerson
- “Living in a Poor Neighborhood Changes Everything about Your Life” by Akiel Chang via Vox
- “How Racism’s Guilt Lasted for Decades” by Emily Badger via The New York Times

To Deepen Your Understanding:
The highly anticipated Black Panther movie is not just the excitement about it is massive. The joy of seeing a Black superhero surrounded by so many strong positive Black characters was exhilarating. T’Challa the rising King, Nakia the spy with beauty, courage and character, Okoye the strong and brave general, and Shuri the smartest person in the world and a new Black Disney Princess was such a beautiful representation of Black people. Even the villain, Erik Killmonger, is sympathetic. His methods are wrong, but many people understand his reasons are rooted in abandonment and a feeling of being lost and disconnected.

This is a typical Marvel movie in that it is an old fashioned popcorn movie fun. However, its positive images resonate deeply with the Black community. My daughter Trinity loves Leia and Rey from Star Wars, because they are clever and strong she says. Now she has Okoye who she calls brave and awesome. Black Panther is a great movie because it is fun, but it is also a great movie because so many little boys and girls now have superheroes that look just like them.

- Karmen Taylor, Program Director

Students and volunteers have loved the new Little Lights Retreat House. Instead of sleeping bags, visiting volunteer groups now have bunk beds, a large common space, and a full kitchen at the Retreat House. On off weeks, when we do not have visiting groups, we have opened up the Retreat House to our middle school students, hosting one-night retreats to foster shared experiences and deepen friendships among our students.

Located on a quiet, peaceful street in Anacostia, the four-bedroom Retreat House was made possible through a generous couple who have invested in Little Lights for many years and wanted to make a special gift toward our work in 2017. Having a place to house volunteer groups had long been on our wish list, and we feel excited and grateful to see it become a reality.

Volunteers from UPM and Wk Tech enjoying the Retreat House during their spring break service trip.

**Little Lights’ Take on Marvel’s Newest Film Black Panther**

Marvel Studios’ blockbuster film, “Black Panther,” has been widely acclaimed since opening in theatres earlier this year.

The impact of Black Panther - the first major superhero movie to have an African protagonist, the first to star a majority black cast, and the first Marvel film written and directed by a black man - was felt by many including those at Little Lights.

We asked one of our students and one of our staff members to share what the film means to them:

Black Panther was an amazing film because it inspired young kids and adults alike. My friends and I were excited to watch the film because we can finally relate to a superhero. We all say “Wakanda, forever!” The message of the movie is although someone may look or sound different, they can still make a difference in the world. Watching this movie made me feel empowered because I don’t have to feel limited by what people think of me. This movie deserves five stars because it sends a good message to the world. This movie can help people in lost and disconnected.

This movie offers five stars because it sends a good message to the world. This movie can help people in their lives and show that anybody can be a role model of the movie is although someone may look or sound like them.

- Jeffrey, 11

**Little Lights Retreat House Gets Rave Reviews**

**Innovative Job Solutions For Our City**

at the Little Lights Breakfast

April 26th, 2018 | Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital | 7am - 8:30 am

Join us for a fresh take on our annual Little Lights Breakfast, as we delve deeper into one aspect of Little Lights’ mission: Creating innovative solutions for our city’s under-employed.

Over breakfast, you will hear from a panel of community members as they discuss the various barriers they have personally faced when seeking employment—and some of the creative solutions Little Lights brings to the table.

To claim your seat at breakfast visit www.littlelights.org.

**Steve Presented with Georgetown University Honor**

This January President John J. DeGioia of Georgetown University presented Steve with the John R. Thompson, Jr. Legacy of A Dream Award during the University’s 16th annual Let Freedom Ring concert. Recognized for his unswerving commitment to public housing communities in Southeast DC, Steve accepted the award in front of Little Lights supporters, family, friends, and the DC community at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Along with the award comes a year-long partnership with Georgetown that will allow Little Lights to enhance and strengthen its efforts within DC’s most vulnerable communities. Congratulations, Steve!

**Do More 24 — 24 Hours of Giving**

May 17th, 12pm - May 18th, 12pm

**Little Lights Benefit**

Saturday, October 13th, 2018
At the historic Howard Theatre
Give to Little Lights from your paycheck through either the Combined Federal Campaign (for government employees) or the United Way (check with your employer). Be sure to tell your friends and coworkers that they can give to Little Lights too!