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Artists invoke de Blasio's son to keep police, race conversation alive

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The weather might have cooled off weeks of protests and raging tensions between New Yorkers and the men and women who police them, but the a new exhibit in Harlem aims to show that the realities of being a young black man are still the same.

Ten faces of young boys adorn a gallery space on a quiet block along Harlem's Amsterdam Avenue. And while they come from different boroughs and range in age and interests, they have in common the color of their skin and the size of their hair — traits they share with the famously 'fro-coiffed son of Mayor Bill de Blasio.

"Finding Dante," named after the mayor's teenage son, came out of writer Rico Washington and photographer Shino Yanagawa's curiosity about how de Blasio's bi-racial son would be treated by police if he didn't have an NYPD protection detail.

New Yorkers first gravitated towards Dante and his Afro's orbit in 2013 when the youngest de Blasio starred in a campaign ad in which he said his dad was the only mayoral candidate "who will end a stop and frisk era that unfairly targets people of color."

And stop-and-frisks are down across the city. After a peak 684,330 stops in 2011 and a steep drop off in former Mayor Michael Bloomberg's last year, de Blasio and NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton recently celebrated less than 100,000 stops in 2014.

Washington said he was inspired when he saw young men of color who looked like Dante de Blasio take part in a "die-in" in front of Barclays Center on Dec. 9. Days earlier, the mayor invoked his and his wife's parenting after a Staten Island grand jury declined to indict the cop who put Eric Garner in an alleged deadly chokehold.

"Chirlane and I have had to talk to Dante for years about the dangers he may face," de Blasio said from Staten Island.

"A good young man, a law-abiding young man, who would never think to do anything wrong," de Blasio said of Dante. "And yet, because of a history that still hangs over us, the dangers he may face, we've had to literally train him — as families have all over this city for decades — in how to take special care in any encounter he has with the police officers who are there to protect him."

Washington added he wants the exhibit to grow and keep the conversation about the experiences of young black men alive even after the protests died down. He nodded his head furiously when asked if de Blasio was one of his target audience members.

"While what he said was nice we want to shore it up with a visual representation of what boys who look like his son go through on a daily basis without a security detail," he said.

A spokeswoman for the mayor's office did not respond to a request for comment.

De Blasio's comments about Dante earned the ire of police union leaders who accused the mayor of fomenting anger and distrust towards cops. Sergeants Benevolent Association President Ed Mullins called de Blasio's comments "hypocritical and moronic."

"He has a security detail of New York City police officers assigned to protect his family, and yet he's making a statement that his son shouldn't feel safe with New York City cops," Mullins said in early December.

Sam Francis, a 15-year old from Fort Greene, is one of the boys featured in the exhibit. He said he was annoyed when de Blasio caught flak for bringing up Dante.

"He's just asking about his son," Sam said as he stood next to his twin brother Ben. "Just because he's the mayor's son doesn't mean he's immune from racial profiling."

Sam said the mayor should double down and reiterate why Dante needs to be more careful than other teens.

Both Sam and Ben were approached randomly on the street by Washington to take part in the project less than a month ago specifically because of their age and hair. The 10th-grade twins said they only began to grow their hair out about six months ago.

"We just didn't want to go to the barber anymore," said Ben, whose Afro has an inch or so on his brother. While they say they've been stopped by people on the street who think they look like Dante, they've never been pulled aside by police. One of their friends, who they described as 6 feet tall and darker-skinned, was stopped.

"It was a pretty traumatizing experience for him," Ben said. "Anytime he walks by police he says he has this constant fear about what if they stop him, what's going to happen."

The twins' father, Peter said, said he's had his own conversations with his sons.

"Be polite, never run, no sudden movements, hands out in front all the time — all those things," he said. Peter Francis said that although he is black, he was born in the United Kingdom and never thought he would need to have that particular talk.

Yet as the Garner case unfolded only miles away and national media scrutinized the deaths of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Missouri and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Ohio at the hands of police, Peter said his sons and their peers began to see themselves in those black men and boys.

"As a parent, you don't ever want your kids to feel that way," he said. "But the reality is they do."

Finding Dante: An Artivism Project by Rico Washington and Shino

(https://www.chashama.org/event/finding_dante) Yanagawa

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chashama 1351 Gallery

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Correction: The print version of this story on Monday, March 1 incorrectly identifies the Francis brothers and their father Peter with the last name Price. Metro sincerely regrets the error.



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