

## To find and forgive their fathers

**In a new book, three doctors, lifelong friends, recount their painful search**

By MEG NUGENT  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

One father was a drug addict and felon, another an alcoholic and a third was violent in the home. All three were estranged from their families.

Now fast-forward 25 years. The sons of these men, three young African-Americans who grew up together, fatherless in tough Newark neighborhoods, decide to find their fathers and rebuild their broken relationships.

You might remember the young men as "The Three Doctors," a trio who made good on a pledge to shepherd each other through medical school and become physicians. Their book about the experience, "The Pact," was a 2002 bestseller.

Now, the friends, Sampson Davis, Rameck Hunt and George Jenkins, have reconnected with their mostly absentee fathers. The message, they say in a new book, "The Bond: Three Young Men Learn to Forgive and Reconnect with Their Fathers" (\$24.95, Riverhead Books), is: Don't wait for Dad to make the first move.

"Be a bigger person and do it, yourself," said Davis.

As teenagers, it was Jenkins who proposed making the pact to go to medical school, eventually attending University High School in Newark.

Years later, it was Hunt who first considered writing about his relationship with his father, Alim Bilal, a drug addict who spent a lot of time in jail during Hunt's childhood. It wasn't until Hunt was 12 that his father became what he describes in the book as "a more consistent presence in my life."

"I never got the sense he didn't want to be around me," Hunt explained. "He was just battling his demons." About 10 years ago, Bilal was able to beat his addiction and return to college to become a drug and alcohol counselor.

Hunt wanted to pursue writing "The Bond" because, "There were questions I had to ask my father and I didn't know how to ask them," he said, like, "Was he upset he conceived me?"

"I needed affirmation. I needed to get that time back, to re-create it with him," he said. Writing a book about their relationship, with his father's cooperation and participation, "would provide a vehicle to get those questions answered."

When Hunt told his two friends about his project, they realized they had their own issues they needed to explore with their fathers and decided to participate in writing the book.

That's not to say they were always enthusiastic about it.

"We took turns being reluctant," said Davis, whose father, Kenneth, left his wife and six children when Davis was 12, after years of a marriage marred by constant arguing and domestic violence.

"We buried a lot a long time ago and, to go back and open up the box and relive these things was something I was not sure I wanted to do," Davis recalled. "All our mothers get the kudos for raising us. They were there during the hard times, when we were hungry and had no heat in the house."

His mother encouraged him to pursue the project. "She knew it was important for me to connect with and know my dad in a way I never had an opportunity to know," he said.

Jenkins, who was a toddler when his mother left his father, George Jenkins Sr., because of his then alcoholism, grew up feeling resentment toward his mostly absent father, who remained in South Carolina.

"I really wanted to hear him explain how things were with us," Jenkins said. "I needed him to say something in regards to how things turned out."

In the book, the sons each write about their experiences and feelings growing up without their dads. In turn, the fathers of Jenkins and Hunt each write a chapter of their own, explaining the events and decisions that led them out of their sons' lives.

The story of Davis' father, who died in May after a protracted battle with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, was supplied through accounts heard through many discussions Davis had with his stepmother and other relatives he had become acquainted with while visiting his father's home in North Carolina.

"I didn't get a lot of questions answered because he was ill," said Davis, "but I know he was proud of me. During his funeral, one of my cousins gave me a copy of a resumé I had put together 12 years ago. The cousin explained, 'Your dad was so proud of you, he sent resúmes to all the family members in South Carolina.' That made me feel like, although I was a grown man, I felt like a kid basking in his father's glory."

When Hunt asked his dad to participate in the book, Hunt said, "He immediately said yes. However, I don't think he really wanted to initially because he knew that would entail laying himself open."

"It brought us closer," he said of the collaboration with his father, who has since suffered a heart attack and brain damage. "It helped him a lot to really talk about these things and face it."

Today, the doctors - who are all 34 and graduates of Newark's University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey - have no children, but are dating.

Hunt said he "absolutely" wants to be a father someday. Writing the book, he said, "taught me that nobody is perfect and the perfect parent doesn't exist. And what makes you a good parent is sacrifice, a willingness to sacrifice for your children."

Davis, a resident of South Orange, is an emergency room doctor at St. Michael's Medical Center in Newark, as well as at Easton Hospital in Easton, Pa., and at Raritan Bay Medical Center in Perth Amboy, where he also serves as assistant medical director of the emergency department.

Hunt, who resides in Franklin Park, is an internist at University Medical Center in Princeton and an assistant professor of medicine at the UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick.

Jenkins, who lives in Newark, practices dentistry in Harlem and teaches at Columbia University College of Dental Medicine.

The doctors also remain involved in their nonprofit Three Doctors Foundation ([www.threedoctorsfoundation.org](http://www.threedoctorsfoundation.org)) to "create opportunities for inner-city communities through education, mentoring and health awareness."