Newspaper; 2016-09-20; Buffalo News; Crafting Commons-sense Path to School Reform

Catherine Collins

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NEW YORK – The man who police said sowed terror across two states, setting off bombs in Manhattan and on the Jersey Shore and setting off a furious manhunt, was tracked down Monday morning sleeping in the dank doorway of a neighborhood bar and taken into custody after being wounded in a gun battle with officers.

The frenzied end came on a rain-soaked street in Linden, N.J., four hours after the police said Rahami had been sighted in the area.

The remarkably swift arrest eased fears across the region, investigators were still in the earliest stages of trying to determine what provoked the attacks, why a street in Manhattan’s Chelsea section was one of the targets and whether the bomber was aided by others. While investigators have been focused on the Afghan-born Rahami’s actions immediately before and after the bombings, they were also working Monday to trace his activities and travel in recent months and years.

One law enforcement official said the bomber was described by his mother as ‘an average kid’ and had traveled to Afghanistan during the summer. Another said Rahami had traveled to Yemen during his time there.

Inside: SUSPECT BECAME A ‘DIFFERENT PERSON’ AFTER A TRIP TO AFGHANISTAN.

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Bomber's mother: 'An average kid'

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**Crafting common-sense path to school reform**

**By Deidre Williams**

news staff reporter

Everything is meticulously decorated in Catherine Fisher Collins’ two-story home in North Buffalo.

A vast art collection fills entire walls, from a high-quality Picasso reproduction to a painting of her two adult children when they were younger. A basement wall is covered with photos of Collins with newsmakers: Jackie Robinson’s widow, Rachel; Cornel West, Mike Tyson, Hillary Clinton, publishing magnate John Johnson, Jesse Jackson and Kweisi Mfume, to name just a few.

Collins, 77, has climbed many professional ladders rung by rung, starting with a health care career that took her from nurse’s aide

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**WEATHER**

Collins’ appointment in March 2013 made her the first woman and the first African-American to represent Western New York on the Board of Regents. Her appointment unsettled longtime Regent Robert M. Bennett, of the Town of Tonawanda, and — along with the appointments of three new Regents — tipped the balance of the board to one viewed as more progressive. Bennett asked about that perception, she said that one of her main objectives is to make sure that teachers see themselves as vital. ‘I think the teachers want us to keep our promise to them and not let them know what’s going on and understand what’s going on before adding another reform,’ she said.

When she was appointed as a Regent, it was seen as a step back from reform efforts by former state Education Commissioner John B. King Jr., who now is U.S. secretary of education. Collins said she has no problem with reform, per se. Instead, it’s the way reform is implemented, she said. It makes more sense to build upon each change, then review it and fold it into something new before adding another reform, she said. ‘My problem is that we reform too much,’ she said. ‘I think most of our kids are living in poverty and under the weight of the system that they need a break.’

She acts.”

She’s the kind of person who gives great thought before acting, she said. ‘She’s somebody I trust and somebody I want to dialogue with her, but that hasn’t been the case yet. She’s not an in-your-face kind of person. She’s a quiet voice in the room that can’t be ignored. Or you’ve had too many upper-respiratory infections. She’s someone who is calm and cool and in control. It’s not a world because of health,’ she said.

‘Some teachers have the idea that they’re going to yell and scream. She’s the kind of person that is responsible for making it “clear to Elia that if she was going to be effective as a commissioner, she needed to hear from parents right from the beginning.” Conversely, Larry Scott has not had much interaction with Collins, but he hopes that will change.

More accessibility is one minor problem, said Scott, co-chairman of the Buffalo Parent Teacher Organization. ‘We’ve made attempts to reach out to her and have an opportunity to dialogue with her, but hasn’t happened yet.’

Buffalo Public Schools enrollment is about 70 percent African-American and Hispanic, and their graduation rates are well below those of white students. Collins has a plan to bring onboard more teachers of color who are already familiar with the students and the school buildings: ‘You can’t teach them to everybody, you have to target them.’

Her plan to “grow our own teachers” is particularly important, given an expected teacher shortage. ‘We want to put people of color in these classrooms. Where are these people? Already in the classrooms, already working with the Common Core curriculum. They already know our kids, already know the culture of the black and brown kids sitting in those classrooms,’ she said. ‘We have an army of people of color sitting in the back of the room. They’re the ones asking why aren’t we building an army of people who are working in their neighborhood assistance. Why can’t we build a career ladder for them to move up? Have our teachers aides become our future teachers?’

Collins has already talked with the local teacher’s aide union, as well as Assistant Superintendent Debra Stokes, D. Peoples-Stokes, Buffalo, and other Regents about the idea to see if it is worth exploring. ‘The union was amenable, said Collins, who plans to present the idea this fall and in a couple of weeks at a national meeting on the issue of teacher shortage. And Peoples- Stokes wants Collins to do more research, so she is putting together a structure for the program.

“What I would like to see is a pilot program here, a system where we could get 30 or 40 teacher’s aides involved in the program to set up a pilot, a structure, them give us feedback.”

Empowering parents

As for what she has accomplished so far as a Regent, Collins pointed to the Offices of Parent Engagement that was born from a workshop she did last year. At the first meeting, the group talked about establishing a statewide Office of Community and Parent Engagement for parents. The office is responsible for things such as making sure that every school has a parent advisory council and a parent room where parents can go, and pick up information. The staff in the office can develop policies that affect parents, such as a Parent Bill of Rights.

“How do you get that revised? And your Parent Bill of Rights contrary to what we want at the state level. Collins said, “It will be very useful for our district.”

She helped secure $2 million in state funding to create the office and hopes the money may trickle down to local districts for their parent and family engagement departments.

For Rumore, her role as a Regent is to be a “representative voice for the students” in the state, she said. ‘She is dedicated to the mission of the Buffalo Schools and is someone the students can look up to, someone they can trust.’

As for her role as a Regent, Collins said that she sees herself as a collaborator on what’s going on in the district and the state, but also a parent involved in the infighting that the district is going through. ‘It’s not the same. You can open up to her and have an opportunity to dialogue with her, but hasn’t happened yet.’

Bezos’ company and the Office of Parent Engagement already in the district, it’s going to be effective as a commissioner, she said. ‘It will be very useful for our district.’

Collins said that there is a need to “back up, slow down” what is going on in the district. ‘Sometimes, it’s hard for parents to get a seat at the table at the state level,’ she said, crediting Collins with making it “clear to Elia that if she was going to be effective as a commissioner, she needed to hear from parents right from the beginning.” Conversely, Larry Scott has not had much interaction with Collins, but he hopes that will change.

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Meanwhile, State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia praised Collins for providing DPCC access to her and State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia. That balances any shortcomings that Collins may have, he said, without answering what those shortcomings might be.

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While it's hard to measure her impact as a Regent in such a short time, Radford pointed out that one of Elia’s strengths is that she listens and doesn’t make snap judgments. ‘Sometimes, it’s hard for parents to get a seat at the table at the state level,” he said, crediting Collins with making it “clear to Elia that if she was going to be effective as a commissioner, she needed to hear from parents right from the beginning.”

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