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Mediating gun violence in Baltimore

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For more than two decades, young people killed each other over lucrative drug trading territory in the Cherry Hill neighborhood of Baltimore City. The area was so dangerous locals called it “Baby Afghanistan.” “Lots of shootings and murders,” says Elgin Maith, site director of Safe Streets, an anti-gun violence initiative located in Cherry Hill and other neighborhoods throughout the Baltimore.



It is an understatement to simply say “things have changed” in Cherry Hill. The neighborhood did not have a single homicide for more than 365 days – twice. Instead of shooting each other to settle beefs, gang members forgive each other. Take a moment to consider that.

Troy Bradley, a Safe Streets violence prevention coordinator and previous violent offender, says it’s all about credibility. “I can pull deep and turn the temperature down. The police only come to the neighborhood to arrest and disrupt. They see the victim as a suspect and they get no information.”

Maith says his team works with police in a different way. “We partner with police not to share information but we advise them how to change their interactions with the community,” he explains.

He emphasizes his team’s local roots to Cherry Hill. “We’re from here – born and raised,” Maith says. Bradley points out that young people give them respect because as ex-offenders, “we’ve been where they are and they know we’re not punks or soft.”

Labeling kids

Gardnel Carter has been a mediator with Safe Streets since 2007, when the program began. Carter spent 23 years behind bars for selling drugs and murder. Education and religion changed his heart and mind during that time in his life. Since then, he has helped others to turn away from violence and drugs.

Carter is adamant when he says, “Stop labeling kids as troubled youth. Young people are not stupid. They see the games played by politicians and executives . . . the backstabbing, cheating, lying and stealing.”

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Merely surviving day-to-day in urban environments can be highly stressful — a matter of life and death. Carter explains, “There’s a lot of fear of being caught ‘naked’ without a gun — it’s kill or be killed.” But easy access to guns and ammunition raises another question in Carter’s mind, “None of these kids live near gun stores, so where are they getting them from?”

Carter points out the need for a constructive outlet for the trauma created by violence. “Everyone around them is experiencing trauma.” Without assistance or an outlet for trauma-related violence, “the culture becomes the outlet,” he says.

‘Clean your soul’

In the Penn-North neighborhood of the city, no one has to explain to Wayne Brewton the wrenching, human toll of street violence. He understands it all too well. He spent 40 years behind bars for violent crimes, including a homicide that he committed as a teenager in the 1970s. While imprisoned, his sister was murdered.

It was a transformative moment for Brewton. Having once victimized others, he was suddenly a victim of violent crime himself. At that awful intersection of offender and victim, he had an epiphany: The only way forward is through enlightenment and forgiveness. This became Brewton’s mission since becoming a mediator with Safe Streets after his release from prison.

“Forgiveness,” Brewton says, “liberates you.” He goes a step further: it isn’t enough to simply forgive a past offense. You must also forget. “You have to clean your soul,” he says.

“When victims tell their stories of how crime affected them,” he says, “feelings of remorse and empathy can grow. Offenders realize, ‘What if that was my mother, father or daughter?’”

While imprisoned, Brewton sought to enlighten the hearts and minds of violent offenders through listening and dialogue. “When they’re in a calmer state, free from distractions, and without the need to impress anyone, they’re a captive audience,” he says.

If offenders can recognize the full consequence of their actions, transformation becomes possible. “When you know better,” Brewton says, “you do better.”

Brewton and his colleagues can’t fix deep-seated problems such as gun violence alone. People who have nothing to lose, who have no positive avenues to gain dignity and self-respect, are less likely to forgive their enemies. Neighborhoods overwhelmed by violence and drug-use require vast resources, and residents need to have a voice in shaping policies and strategies aimed at reducing violence and illegal drugs.

Until then, as Brewton says, “the work must go on.”

Jeff Trueman, Esq., is a commercial mediator and a community advisory board member of Safe Streets Baltimore. He would like to thank writer Dave Sheinin for his contribution to this article.

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