



Reducing Youth Violence—The Community-Based Violence-Free Zone Initiative

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Past approaches to reducing youth violence by using repression and sanctions simply have not stemmed the tide. Attempts at school reform in many urban areas have largely failed, because there cannot be any meaningful reform where there is violence and fear. In Baltimore, \$20 million was invested in an initiative to divide larger schools into smaller schools—all still in the same building. Students from one of those schools were given uniforms, in a futile attempt to honor their status as advanced students. The result: the kids with uniforms became targets for fights, and the uniforms had to be taken away. In many schools children are fearful of even going to school because of assaults. Teachers in some schools give up their careers out of fear and frustration. Last year police in Milwaukee received more than 11,000 calls to respond to incidents at Milwaukee public schools. At an affluent Montgomery County, Maryland high school, a security guard was attacked by students in full view of video cameras.

Unfortunately, public officials talk about school reform and reducing school violence as though they were two independent entities. But just as economic development of a neighborhood must address civil order, the degree of civil order in a school is related to the ability of that system to improve itself.

There have been two types of approaches to the worsening problems of our schools. Both are external. One attempts to focus on the children, as Oprah Winfrey has done. She took girls from high crime schools in Chicago, gave them tutoring, grooming lessons, and other advantages, and then reintroduced them to their own neighborhoods. On their return, they were teased by their peers. The culture of failure consumed these kids, and they fell back into dysfunctional behaviors. She has now taken the same concept to South Africa, hoping that the culture there will not doom her investment. The other approach attempts to reform the institutions, reducing school size, providing more training of teachers and principals, and even hiring psychologists. Police are now becoming part of the schools. The latest wrinkle is the addition of video cameras. At Churchill High School in Potomac, Maryland, video cameras didn't deter the fighting but we got to see the video of the security guard being beaten up by students.

If you all you do is remove the children and try to change them, and externally alter the institutions in those communities, you fail to address the real substance of why young people, families and communities fail. There is a culture of failure that must be changed and overturned. Detention, suspensions, and other repressive measures do not work because these kids have been sanctioned all their lives. Many of them already are victims of abuse

and neglect, and they don't even fear death. As one young man said, "It is better to be wanted for murder than not to be wanted at all." You cannot confront a value crisis like that through tutoring, or teacher training, or uniforms or class sizes.

What is unique about our Violence-Free Zone approach is that it addresses both levels of the problem at the same time. It seeks to transform the values, beliefs, and therefore the behavior of the children. At the same time it challenges the value norms of the community in an effort to change the culture so that it no longer encourages failure but instead rewards success.

Origins of the Approach—The House of Umoja

The principles of the Violence-Free Zone initiative are drawn from the work of Sister Falakah Fattah and her husband David, who in the 70's and 80's rescued the city of Philadelphia from being the "youth gang capital of America," as it was then known. Discovering that the oldest of their six boys had become an active gang member, Sister Fattah responded by inviting 13 of his friends to come and live in their small row house, replacing the family furniture with mattresses on the floors. She told them, "I don't know anything about gangs. But I do know about family." They named their place the House of Umoja, and established rules together that governed conduct, such as requiring that everyone go to school or to work. They settled disputes at an "Adella"—a peace session where everyone would participate in finding a solution and meting out punishment if necessary. Other gang members sought refuge in this peaceful place, and eventually the Fattah's bought the other houses on the block and refurbished them. In 1983, the media-labeled "Wolf Packs" of marauding teenagers roamed the streets assaulting people. The Fattahs formed a Crime Prevention Taskforce by going to the county prison and enlisting 135 inmates, who gave them the names of 150 young people from the various corners to bring to them. The youths were brought by bus the following Saturday, and the inmates told the young guys that their behavior had to stop. And it did—all because of the creative thinking of the Fattahs, who saw how to use the community to heal itself. I studied Umoja and the Fattahs for several years, and chronicled their principles in a book called *A Summons to Life*.

Some of the young men who were part of the Umoja family back then are here today, and they have gone on to college and business world. One, Curtis Jones, was Philadelphia's Finance Director, and then headed a highly successful business incubator and development corporation. He is now standing for City Council.

The First Violence-Free Zone—Benning Terrace, Washington, DC

We applied Sister Fattah's principles to the conflict in Benning Terrace in 1997, when the Circle and Avenue youth factions were locked in murderous combat. When a 12-year old boy was killed, I told a community group that we were assisting, the Alliance of Concerned Men, that this was a chance to prove their abilities. They reached the leaders of the two factions and brought them to the Center's offices, where over a period of days we negotiated a truce. We partnered with David Gilmore of the DC Housing Authority, who provided jobs and training. We committed to these youths that if they turned away from violence, we would commit to them, and as a consequence, there have been no crew-related killings in Benning Terrace in almost 10 years. We took that model and exported it to other cities, identifying neighborhood leaders that had the trust and confidence of the young people. We helped them adapt the model to meet the needs of their locales. Omar Jahwar of Dallas, for instance, was the first to take the Violence-Free Zone initiative into the schools, with outstanding success. And now the VFZ is in 20 schools at six locations: Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Milwaukee, Washington, DC, and Prince George's County, MD.

The Community-Based Organizations—What it Takes to Start a VFZ:

The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise found each of these community leaders working at full time jobs but volunteering their spare time to help young people. We regarded them as social entrepreneurs and raised money so they could quit their jobs and make their avocations their vocations. We helped them establish organizations just as a venture capitalist would do in the business world who finds an honest entrepreneur and helps him or her with intense technical assistance. Then we helped them develop their budgets, and provided the start-up money. We also linked them to one another so they could share best practices, and talk about challenges and obstacles to overcome.

The leaders of these organizations are of two types. As I described in my book *The Triumphs of Joseph*, there are those who have ridden on stolen bikes and those that have not. Some of the leaders here have had no criminal records, the others have. Sister Fattah's effectiveness had nothing to do with having a criminal past. Her effectiveness, and that of these leaders here, has to do with the respect that people in the affected communities have for them. All share qualities of humility and empathy that in some cases comes because an individual has walked and turned from a troubled road. And others have not themselves failed but have relatives or friends who have fallen.

The Youth Advisors:

The neighborhood-based organizations then hire and train young adults in the community who also have the trust and confidence of young people. These young adults act as "Youth Advisors" and work in the schools as hall monitors, mentors, and support systems for the teachers, school staff, and the students. They also take the most disruptive kids as identified by the school staff, and give them special attention and character- building training. The youth advisors exhibit the same qualities as the organization leaders. They share the knowledge of the neighborhood and the challenges the kids today are facing. Some are ex-offenders, some are not. But what they do have in common is that they do not fear the children. And their love and commitment to them is not based on a funded program. Most have made a lifetime commitment to these kids.

Sister Fattah taught us that the young people first need to have a chance to rest and to feel love. Many of these children are accustomed to people acting in a repressive way with them. They wait to be hit either emotionally or physically. So they act in ugly ways to provide the other person to in fact treat them that way. Youth Advisors are able to look beyond the expressions of fear and pain and anger, reach past them, and either physically or emotionally put their arms around that child and say, "If I have done anything to cause you to act the way you are acting, please accept my apologies." The Youth Advisors are patient and persistent, until the child opens up and reveals what is causing the pain.

Youth Advisors Are Character Coaches and Moral Mentors:

What does that mean? As William Barclay says, the law restrains a person through fear, but love redeems him by inspiring him to be better than his best. "There is no inspiration in all the world like love. Whoever went out from the presence of his loved one without the desire to be a better person? Life no longer becomes a burden to be borne, but a privilege to be lived up to." As Sister Fattah has taught us, the goal of this relationship is not just to stop the young person's predatory behavior. It is one goal, but it is incomplete, because what happens if the young person stops injuring others only to turn that anger and frustration on himself and engages in self-destructive behavior? Victory is incomplete if a child ceases to be a menace to society, but remains a menace to him or herself. As one of our Youth Advisors said, "Now that we have stopped the violence, we can concentrate on rebuilding the lives of these young people so they can be everything that God intended them to be."

An excellent example of this is that reported by one of the former Benning Terrace residents, Charles Penny, who has been a volunteer leader for 10 years along with 19 other young black men. Once part of the problem there, after the peace they came back to act as coaches and mentors to the children in that neighborhood. Charlie was proud to announce at a recent meeting of the teams that seven of his players had achieved the honor roll and he held up their report cards. They received a standing ovation from the rest of the kids. This illustrates how the culture is changed.

The young people are never treated as clients. They are made to believe that they are important and have something to begin to contribute to the well-being of someone else. That principle of reciprocity is important, for if somebody is constantly the recipient of someone else's largesse, after a while that child or person will not only despise the gift but the gift giver.

The Youth Advisors are able to forge bonds with the children almost immediately because the child sees not an advocate but a witness. The children are persuaded to change when they can see someone who has faced the same challenges they face and has successfully overcome those challenges. That person becomes a living witness to that child that change and transformation is possible.

The Youth Advisors also are able to protect the students. If the child says "someone is threatening to beat me up," that child knows he or she is not snitching. They do not lose any respect from their peers by sharing things that are happening to them. Schools tell the students to report bullying to the teacher or principal. But no child can maintain self respect in the school if he or she is running to the teacher. Youth Advisors offer an alternative because they can go to the contending parties and attempt to find out the source of the conflict. Because they are respected by both sides they are able to mediate that conflict, and thus, the self respect of both parties is maintained. It provides both sides a respectful way to withdraw without losing face and without snitching. Adults do not realize how powerful the pressure is not to snitch. In one school, for instance, after a young person was found to have a gun and was arrested, the class was asked how many people knew that he had brought a weapon to school. About 10 kids raised their hands. But no one had told the school staff. We call this the buzz. Our Youth Advisors can tune into the buzz, because the kids do not consider confiding in them as "snitching."

The Youth Advisors are able to mediate between teachers and students. In Baltimore, for instance, a female teacher was being harassed by some students who often cussed her out when she tried to keep them from loitering in the hallways. On one occasion, there were six boys blocking the entrance to her room, one with a digital camera. A seventh youth threw an ice ball and knocked her down--and the school administration did nothing. When the teacher told New Vision leader Billy Stanfield, he and the Youth Advisors identified the boys involved and took them into a separate room and told them flatly that this behavior would not be permitted. Sometimes the Youth Advisors have to wear their resumes on their chests! But what the Youth Advisors said was, "This teacher is down with all of us, and anything happens to her happens to us." This had a definite impact on the culture, because two weeks later the same teacher approached some of the boys and one started to cuss. Another youth immediately said, "Don't disrespect a woman." With that, that teacher knew that Billy and the Youth Advisors were really altering the culture in the school. A similar incident happened when some youths surrounded the vice-principal and were getting ready to beat him up. The Youth Advisors came on the scene and the youths withdrew. Again, all they said was, "Mr. Jones is down with us." The Youth Advisors handled these situations in a way that did not take any authority away from the vice principal or the teacher. And the

culture continues to improve when the teacher sees the child's behavior changing and begins to act differently toward the child

In their presentation each of the organization leaders will talk about their own unique ways of changing the culture so that success is praised and welcomed by other kids. They will tell you specifically how they are able to change the culture and what the techniques and strategies are that they employ.

Every one of these organization leaders and Youth Advisors place their lives in jeopardy every day. Just a few examples:

- Gwen Sands of Atlanta, founder of VisionsUnlimited, is a well-educated woman who chose to operate in one of most dangerous zip codes in America.
- Curtis Watkins of East Capitol Center for Change in Washington, DC and Prince George's County interceded between two fighting guys who were both at least a foot taller than he, telling them, "If you want to hit someone, hit me!"
- Ramon Candelaria and staff members of the Latino Community Center in Milwaukee walk the streets several nights a week to talk to young people where they hang out on the street corners.
- Omar Jahwar of Dallas' Vision Regeneration went before the heads of the Mexican Mafia appealing for the release of a youth from the gang. They were laughing and talking in Spanish, and he learned afterward that they were discussing who was going to kill him. But the courage and selflessness he demonstrated by going to them saved his life and that of the young man he was helping.
- In Baltimore, there were 800 kids in the school auditorium almost out of control. Just one of Billy Stanfield's New Vision Youth Services Youth Advisors held up his hands, and the room became quiet.

The principles of the Violence-Free Zone follow the medical model. Just as the human body tends to reject a transplant, most of the present strategies to combat youth violence fail because they come from outside the body. Measures that are parachuted in, no matter how well-intended they may be, have the consequence of being rejected. The VFZ organization leaders and the Youth Advisors represent antibodies—they are part of the body and they help the body heal itself, and we have the evidence to prove it. They should be supported-- not just because they are community-based, but because they have proven their effectiveness with measurable outcomes. We invite you to look at the results.

To sum this up, school reform and efforts to reduce school violence must be brought together and integrated. When school and other public officials contemplate reforms and restructuring of institutions, they should sit with these grassroots leaders – the moral mentors and character coaches – that are major influences of the culture. They should ask them how are the reforms that are contemplated supportive of the cultural transformation that you are achieving?

Not until the institutional reforms support the positive cultural change will the schools be able to achieve the goals of quality education and a safe learning environment. They must be brought together.

