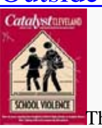
Outside the classroom, turf wars claim young lives



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Longtime neighborhood peace activist Khalid Samad, traces the history of gang violence and calls on decision makers to include "leaders with street credibility" in planning antiviolence programs. by Stephanie Klupinski June, 2005

Khalid Samad talks with students near East Tech High School. The longtime Cleveland activist helped found the Taskforce for Community Mobilization, a collection of local groups working together to end violence.

The outbreak of violence that gunned down 11-year-old Brandon Davis and 16-year-old Lennard Pinson earlier this year has roots that go back to the proliferation of national gangs and crack cocaine in Cleveland during the 1980s. The streets calmed down in the early 1990s after national

attempts by gang members and community members to broker peace in various cities. Those efforts led to the establishment of the National Council for Urban Peace and Justice and summits in several cities, including one in Cleveland in 1993. The federal government and large foundations promised jobs, training and education.

But the peace dividend never materialized, says Khalid Samad, a special assistant to Cleveland's director of public safety and a member of Peace in the Hood and the Community Task Force on Community Mobilization. Instead, funding went toward law enforcement, leaving faith-based and nontraditional groups with limited dollars to do community work. As Samad sees it, this contributed to the resurgence of violence in the late 1990s.

And it's still rising - gang-related, youth homicides in cities with over 100,000 people increased 34 percent from 1999 to 2003, according to the National Youth Gang Center.

In April, Samad was involved in an attempt to renew a truce between neighborhood groups when Davis became the second youth shot to death this year outside the Lonnie Burten Recreation Center on the east side. Pinson was killed there in January. In an interview with Catalyst Associate Editor Stephanie Klupinski, Samad recounts efforts to broker peace and analyzes the city's street gang problem and what can be done about it.

When and why did efforts to sustain the peace fall apart in Cleveland?

By the late '90s, you begin to see a group of young people who were maybe 7,8,9, or10 [years old] when the [original] truce effort took place who were now 17 or 18 and had no historical connectedness to the peace movement. … Because the groups didn't claim the national [gang names] anymore, many just started calling themselves by their neighborhoods. So what emerged in the late '90s were names like Kinsman County Killers, King Kennedy Outlaws, Garden Valley Boys, D30 [from the area around East 30th Street], Case Court, Outhwaite. And we began to see the resurgence of hostility in terms of the neighborhood and the schools and then the explosion of the "gangsta" rap lyrics came back.

By '98, '99, was when "wet" [marijuana dipped in formaldehyde or PCP] started hitting the fan in Cleveland. … Shootings emerged, not so much drive-bys but big fights at concerts, after concerts, at the Cotton Club, in the Flats. … These fights promoted more balkanization, and the groups that emerged as the strongest were the ones that had the largest numbers in their neighborhood.

Where were these groups based?

Naturally, the [public] housing estates because you've got the largest number of people living closest to each other. … By about 2001, basically the whole city was rebalkanized. Even the west side was brought into it, the West 130th Street and Detroit Avenue area, Madison Avenue. You see it right now.

The East 30th [Street] area was almost like a dumping area, to some degree, in the public housing-there have been a lot of transient residents who have found their way down there. They may have moved down there from other areas. So the problematic things taking place there are a direct result of that population-about 90 percent single parent. And among those single parents, there are disproportionate percentages of young female parents and grandparents who are raising the children.

And then people who were booted from there come back to contribute to the instability-going down there to sell drugs, collect debt,… In the past, this neighborhood produced some of the best athletes and most prominent people, like Jesse Owens and the Stokes brothers [Louis and Carl]. But this generation now has no concept of history. They don't have a cultural consciousness. … So all those young people gravitate toward one another and they developed what became the largest, strongest street group in Cleveland. What you saw emerge in the last few months-the beef between Garden Valley and King Kennedy [public housing projects] is a direct result of this rebalkanization.

How does isolation of the East 30th Street public housing area affect residents and ultimately provoke violence?

You've got 25 to 100 kids in a [small, constrained area] not going to school, riding around on bikes all day, hanging out and doing what they want to do. … They should be able to resolve conflicts [but] they don't see it that way-that we're all together. It's only positive if something [they see as] good is coming out of it. They think it's positive because others don't go there because the 30th guys will jump them. They think it's positive because they have… the ability to call shots and intimidate people.

[There are] well over 100 members. They identify themselves as the neighborhood. If you say anything about it being a gang, they look at you like you're crazy. [They think,] "We just live here. We just look out for our own."

After Lennard [Pinson] got killed, I started looking at statistics [from the census and the schools] and started looking at dropout rates, incarceration rates from [public] housing areas. … East 30th had the highest dropout rate, the highest rates of children labeled as [special education]. The [majority of] boys weren't even going to school anymore by 7th grade.

Why do kids get involved with groups?

There is a social pathology. … [Some] don't empathize with other people's pain and their feelings. These are the kids that suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, get separated from their mothers at an early age and grow up in the street culture and identify with that social construct. Consequently [when young people get killed], the feelings are different among the younger ones.

The older people will respond with outrage and remorse. As you get further down to the younger ones, if it's not someone from their neighborhood, then [those feelings] lessen, and there is more insensitivity, even though you would think because they are a similar age they would feel it the most. … It's that age group between 10 and 11-they are trying to identify what is manhood, and the social and cultural structures are so weak that they don't sympathize or empathize. To them, it is just another dead young person, which is sad. But that's how they look at it. …And it's more pronounced [in the East 30th public housing area] because of the level of disorder, but [the residents] don't see it. … They didn't create those conditions. They were created by racism, insensitivity and social neglect.

Are certain types of kids more likely to get involved with these groups than others?

Now, a lot of your athletes are involved heavily in this whole thing. … Everyone gravitates to the recreation center or basketball court. When I was growing up… we had men that were married at the playground where I hung out, basketball players going to college, men who came from strong families…

[The athletes today] clearly have the abilities. They continue to play, but [some]… are not disciplined enough to keep their grades up and they're not disciplined enough to stay out of trouble because they are involved with people in the street life. … Some of the same young kids who were on [recreation] teams when they were young were all friends with one another. Then when they get out of middle school, they become divided amongst themselves based upon their loyalty to a housing estate and whoever is the leader of the street organizations, so rivalries emerge and cause troubles in the schools. … That's how Lennard [Pinson] got killed. He was an athlete, played on the basketball team, but because of a rivalry [he was killed].

There have been many recent changes in the district, including staff layoffs and the recently announced school closings. How do they affect school violence?

[The shuffling of schools is] going to have a major impact. … It's going to be a challenge on the south east side with Alexander Hamilton 6-8 being closed and Corlett PreK-6. Clearly, Alfred H. Benesch K-6 is going to represent a big challenge for Marion-Sterling K-6 and George Washington Carver PreK-7 because [many young people] have been conditioned to see each other as adversaries. There has to be some major diplomacy work.

They interact in the school OK, but as soon as they get out of school they fall into their neighborhood thing. It's going to get worse because at Sterling, most of their population is from 30th, and the closing of Benesch is going to bring [others] there. And George Washington Carver is going to get more from neighborhoods outside the area. They are going to be unfamiliar with each other.

Another contributor to violence at Glenville High and East High has been those small schools. There's a lack of central authority as it relates to each kind of incident. Academically, small schools are very optimal, but as it relates to safety and security issues, they're sub-optimal.

… Who's in charge?

Describe your recent efforts to bring about peace with these youth.

We had a retreat and brought young men from King Kennedy and Outhwaite [public housing], back in February, to be part of the overall effort. It's called Team Time Out because all these athletes we're involved with understand "time out." … We're using that as opposed to truce because sometimes they don't get the language in terms of the language of diplomacy. … We talked to them about how to do rumor control, how to set up conflict resolution and mediation efforts among themselves. We developed outreach teams made up of faith-based community leaders from around the neighborhood.

Out of that retreat, we moved the process along. As we already knew, 30th had to be brought in. … [That group has] what they call street credibility, and that's essential to something like this.

… The week before Brandon was shot [on April 4th], we got some older people to step up, and they signed off on the peace treaty. I went to Brandon's school. Brandon signed the peace treaty [along with other students from George Washington Carver K-8 school].

…Then, Brandon got shot and it just brought everything crashing in on us in terms of how close we were to this. …You've got to be able to see-Stevie Wonder could see the connections in terms of what was going on. All the energy that was directed toward [peace], how close we were. But it

just wasn't meant to happen. But now East 30th is at the table-all the young people from 30th have signed the truce and cease fire.

The May 6th meeting [at Cuyahoga Community College] brought about 150 youths and 100 adults together, with almost equitable representation from the different housing estates. They signed the last part of the peace treaty-a covenant between themselves, their creator, the leadership, and the community.

What is essential to sustaining the peace?

Most [decision makers] in urban America in general don't understand the importance of including the people they look at as being un-empowered in agreements. … Non-traditional leaders need some validation or recognition because they have street credibility and can be instrumental in mediation and conflict resolution. … People on the outside looking in may say that their intention is to empower people, but that's not really the case. … So we're saying it has to be an inclusive thing. We, as so-called leaders with street credibility and the faith-based community and [other] leaders in the community-we all contract with one another, we covenant one another. That word is bond and we'll do everything we can to help the process out. But [decision makers] have to be just as involved and engaged as us, and that's the commitment that we missed in 1993.

What is preventing this from happening?

Outside agencies have the four-star proposal writers and get the bulk of the money coming from the Department of Education, Justice or Health and Human Services. … They have the high-degree people, but they're not getting the best results. …If they were getting the work done with all the millions of dollars they've been getting over the past 15 years, we wouldn't have this problem.

… If you look across the boards of all your large foundations and agencies, especially the big ones in the suburbs providing to the city, you won't find one nontraditional board member on any of them. You won't see anyone with a cultural specific name like mine. …There's a billion Muslims in the world and between 20,000 and 30,000 in the Greater Cleveland area, and you won't find any of them on the board. You won't find anyone who's in an executive director [role with an] Afrocentric approach to development and service providing. Usually [those people] will be marginalized to an outreach position where policy is not developed. That's a major problem.

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