



Inequality of life: Drawing a line

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SECOND IN A SERIES

This story was reported and written by Plain Dealer reporters Leila Atassi, Rachel Dissell, Stan Donaldson, Joe Guillen, Jesse Tinsley and Michael Heaton.

Steve Nolan sits on a rusty fold-up chair outside his party store on East 79th Street, chatting and watching the happenings in his St. Clair-Superior neighborhood. Two boys -- maybe 7 years old -- walk up to the shop, fiddle around with loose change in their pockets and talk about what candy to buy. A car rides by, and one of the boys clasps his hands and points his fingers in the shape of a gun.

"POW, POW, POW!" he says, pretending to shoot at the car.

Nolan shakes his head.

"Those are the ones we have to get," he says. "Someone needs to show them a better way."

Nolan, a former street tough turned gang intervention specialist, is one of those someones -- one of the people who go out on their own to fight the overwhelming tide of crime, despair and lawlessness in Cleveland. Some work directly with the youths. Others have come up with unique ways of fighting crime.

They are Cleveland's peacemakers. Keep reading to discover their stories.

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IT'S AN EVENING in March, and **Khalid Samad** has organized yet another vigil for **another dead teen**.

For nearly three decades Samad, 54, has called these gatherings. He was in his mid-20s when he turned to community activism. A lot of peacemakers have come and gone since, but Samad has been rock-steady. He is founder and 20-year head of Peace in the Hood, a Cleveland-based nonprofit organization that works with city youths.

Tonight, the vigil is for 13-year-old Terrance Allen, shot to death in a parking lot at East 79th Street and Superior Avenue. As the crowd of 200 talks of the tragedy of Terrance's death, shots ring out from a car on the street.

The crowd screams and scatters.

Samad is unfazed. He stands tall, his powerful voice rising above the screams, and he calls for the crowd to fight their fear of the cowards who fired the shots.

"Don't run, don't," Samad shouts through a bullhorn. "Come on back. All the young people come on back. ... They are not going to win."

The shooters speed away.

Samad calms the crowd and makes sure the children get home safely.

Then he gathers some men and community activists to march at sunset into the heart of one of Cleveland's most dangerous neighborhoods. His target: To talk teens out of the thug life.

Shots are ringing out elsewhere. And the night is still young. ¶
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GLENVILLE, scarred by decay, lies just east of St. Clair-Superior.

Empty storefronts and boarded-up homes line East 105th Street between Superior and St. Clair avenues. In the middle is Elim Gospel Chapel. Lamont Richmond stands out front and points to a nearby corner where dealers peddle drugs and flaunt their "pimped out" cars.

"My son got shot in the leg right there when someone tried to rob him and a friend," said Richmond, who lives next to the nondenominational church.

A fourth-generation church member, Richmond hopes to re-create "Chilling in the Chapel," a program he started there in the late '80s when his two sons were teens.

The program let young people into the church a few nights a week to play games, socialize and get help with homework. The program ended in the late '90s when church membership declined and Richmond's sons grew older.

Richmond, 52, is a construction contractor and former employee for Amer-I-Can, a program that teaches life skills to inner-city residents. With his new version of Chilling in the Chapel, he plans to focus on teaching teens the construction trade and wants to keep the church open to drug dealers, gang members and addicts.

"I think it is harder for the older guys," he said. "You can teach the youngsters, but the older ones have more-mature needs, have been in the streets longer and have limited choices." ¶



AN AROMA of French fries and hot wings floats on the early-summer air as several members of the Trap Squad teen gang stop to grab a bite at Steve Nolan's Taste of Louisiana party store on East 79th Street.

The teens trot into the small shop. A few wear sagging pants with guns poking out of their back pockets. They chat about a house party where a gang member was shot.

"Who got shot?" asks Nolan, a former street tough who also owns a small construction company. Then to one of the teens, he says, "I haven't seen you in a while."

The youth walks up to the counter and turns his neck to show some wounds, then lifts his shirt to show a bullet wound near his shoulder.

"This is where I've been," he says.

Nolan asks them for details, and a few say they were dancing and drinking in someone's living room when shots were fired into the home.

"They got to shooting and I pulled my piece out and didn't know who to buck at," the wounded teen says. "It was so many people in there."

As everyone ran for cover, the teen says, he hobbled out of the house to shoot back. The cops never came, he said.

Nolan says: "You have to start thinking more. What if someone else got shot?"

The teen looks at Nolan, says he agrees. Then he shakes his head, grabs his hot fries and walks off with his friends. ¶



Across town on Cleveland's near West Side lives Jimmy D'Amico, who drives around his Ohio City neighborhood at night looking for hookers.

He's not interested in sex. He hands out fliers for Project Hope, a program to help prostitutes get out of the sex trade.

Arrests don't solve the hooker problem, D'Amico knows. For 19 years, he has lived above his uncle Phil D'Amico's All State Barber College, next to Market Square Park. So he has seen streetwalkers for a long time.

"Living here, I've seen cops do the prostitution stings periodically. You're just chasing them to another corner," he says. "Or they get short jail time and are right back out on the street."

D'Amico, 52, sets out at the corner of Lorain Avenue and West 26th Street, weaving his way to Detroit Avenue, where gay bars attract transvestites and transgender prostitutes.

D'Amico is on his second turn around the loop. It's a quiet night, hooker-wise. But it's early. Not even midnight.

"The funny thing is you don't have to go out at night, necessarily, to find hookers," D'Amico says. "I was filling up yesterday at noon and was approached by a girl at the gas station."

D'Amico, a project manager for Quinn Iron, spots what appears to be a transvestite crossing an empty lot under the street lights on the south side of Detroit Avenue. He pulls down the nearest side street and waits. She slinks over to the car and leans down to look in the passenger side window.

"Hi, fellas. What's up?"

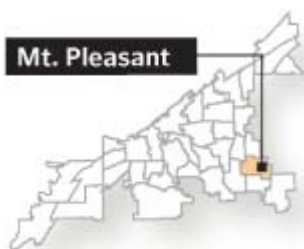
D'Amico grabs a Project Hope flier from his visor and hands it to her.

"Here's something for you to read," D'Amico says. The woman thanks him and wanders off.

Project Hope offers prostitutes a six- to eight-week treatment program that includes counseling and outpatient housing. It was introduced in 1998 by Cleveland Municipal Judge Angela Stokes.

"The idea with Project Hope is that it changes people," D'Amico says. "That's when you see changes in the neighborhood." □

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IT'S A HOT DAY in June, and Samad is at a Peace in the Hood office on Kinsman Road. The mood is lighter today than on those days when the volunteers plan vigils or attend funerals.

A man in the office plays African drums for 30 to 40 teens who attend a daily summer camp at the center. Across the street, teens stand around and try to look like toughs. They are a stark contrast to the playful kids listening to the drummer, bobbing their heads and clapping hands.

"For some of these youngsters, this is something they don't get to do when they get home because their mothers and fathers are not around," Samad says. "We have to expose them to different things like this because it helps keep them out of negativity."

A FORMER GANG MEMBER opens his laptop to display a slideshow of three images almost too grisly to stomach.

Running in a continuous loop, the pictures show different angles of the blood-splattered head of Anthony Gordon, 16, who was shot and killed outside a Flats nightclub in January 2006.

"That was a kid that didn't have to lose his life," says Twon Billings, a former Crips gang member turned community activist.

Billings has made it his mission to stop Cleveland kids from killing each other. With Anthony, Billings believes he failed. So every day, he looks at these pictures for motivation to keep working.

It's an unorthodox tactic that offers a glimpse into Billings' unorthodox version of community activism. He's not about organizational meetings or vigils for murder victims to denounce violence in the 'hood.

That's all empty talk, he says.

Billings favors a "scared straight" approach. He cites his violent background in cautionary tales to kids. An open casket is the backdrop for a flier advertising his latest venture, Mothers Against Youth Violence.

But police say Billings crossed the line from community activist to amateur crime-fighter.

Billings would arrange with single mothers to keep their boys in school and off the streets. Billings and his associates would brandish badges and wear shirts that said "Agent." Billings also carried a Taser and handcuffs.

One day last June, a 17-year-old told police the men "arrested" him for fighting, handcuffed him and took him to his home on Revere Avenue.

Billings and his four-man team were charged with abduction, impersonating a police officer and other crimes. Billings pleaded guilty to unlawful restraint and impersonating an officer. He was sentenced to five months.

But some community members support Billings.

Soon after his arrest, Charmaine Ray, a mother who signed up with Billings' intervention effort, told The Plain Dealer that Billings' work is valuable to the community. Her son was one of three teens listed as victims in the police report on the June incident.

"Everything that he was telling my son was the truth," Ray said.



JAMES RICHARDS hands out disposable cameras to some of his neighbors in the Lee-Harvard area so they can photograph suspicious activity and turn the pictures in to police.

He and his volunteer posse take snapshots of cars -- including the license plates -- parked in front of drug houses. In late August, Richards got a letter from Cleveland Safety Director Martin Flask, who said police will now keep on eye out for drug activity at five houses in the neighborhood.

Consider Richards, who has lived on Talford Avenue for nine years, the eyes and ears of his neighborhood.

Richards, 57, wonders why he always sees the same criminals and drug dealers on Talford.

Perhaps the letter from Flask is the prelude to greater police presence.

"I'm just waiting to see what the response is, see if they really shut them down," Richards said.

Many neighborhood seniors feel intimidated and have little appetite for getting in the faces of cocky teens and other disorderly people, Richards says. But he's an exception.

"They don't want to go to war with me."

One possible answer is more service centers, Richards says. So he's pushing for more neighborhood institutions like the Harvard Community Services Center, the only place of its kind in Lee-Harvard.

There is a girls' drill team -- the Harvette Drillettes -- that practices behind the center and requires the girls to maintain at least a C average in school. Another program pairs kids with seniors so they can better relate to each other.

"Our competition is the TV and those rappers," says Elaine Gohlstein, the center's executive director. "It's becoming a challenge, of course." ¶



SUPERIOR AVENUE is a dividing line between warring gangs to the north and south. Samad, as part of his work in Peace in the Hood, is determined to rip that line from the psyche of troubled youths.

On a night in April, he and other peacemakers gather kids from both sides for a peace rally in the East High School parking lot, at the southeast corner of Superior and East 79th Street.

North-siders are uneasy about venturing across the street, knowing that stepping onto enemy turf can have unpleasant consequences. Even kids walking home from school know there's a point along Superior Avenue they must avoid.

Children are under siege here, Samad says, describing a neighborhood infested with guns and drugs and home to hundreds of sexual predators and street-corner drug dealers. Children must walk through a "gantlet of chaos" just to get to and from school, Samad says.

The area is economically depressed with few jobs for young people, says Samad, adding that some youths tempt fate by stealing pit bulls to make money.

"Young people are on survival mode," Samad says. "They are suspended, not rooted in anything. They feel the group [gangs] will give them actual physical protection against things that threaten their survival."

Schools, law enforcement and community and faith-based organizations have much work ahead to make the neighborhood safe, Samad says.



HENRY SENYAK steadies his night-vision video camera on its tripod between the front seats of his van and turns its eye to a crowd that has piled into the two-story Lava Lounge on Auburn Avenue in Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood.

"They know they're being watched," Senyak says, laughing at bar-hoppers who stare suspiciously at his van. "I love it."

As Senyak fiddles with the lens, a car emblazoned with the Cleveland Fire Department logo parks on the street, and two inspectors enter the bar in search of a manager. From Senyak's post he can see through an upstairs window a bartender showing the inspectors a fire extinguisher.

"That upstairs bar is going to get shut down tonight," Senyak says. "It's a fire trap. They don't even have a fire escape."

Senyak should know. For the past few years, he has collected and pored over public records -- including occupancy permits, building violation notices and zoning variances -- for dozens of Cleveland bars, nightclubs and strip joints, checking to make sure they comply with the law. If not, he turns them in.

And at least several times a month, Senyak loads his video camera in his van and heads into the night -- hoping to capture evidence of bars operating outside the law.

What started as a personal fight to shut down an illegally operating nightclub across from his house on Starkweather Avenue has become a routine public service for the urban vigilante.

The city -- with only one code enforcement inspector working nights -- has let too much slide, Senyak says.

It's not the nightlife that he objects to; rather, it's what he says is the precedent that city officials set by turning a blind eye to some violations, such as operating without proper permits from the city.

Midnight has come and gone, and the nightlife in Senyak's West Side neighborhood is in full swing. He drives slowly, taking video footage and pointing out homes of people who have told him they are suffering.

"We almost need a Quality of Life Czar in this city," Senyak says.