



STOP KILLING OUR DREAMS

THE POET LANGSTON HUGHES POSED THE QUESTION, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Our children represent our future dreams, and they are in peril. EBONY is beginning a three-part series on youth violence that will focus on Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, three cities plagued by urban unrest. As we struggle to understand the nature of this widespread systemic illness, we have uncovered some possible cures. We begin part one of our series in Chicago, where 216 young people were murdered during the first 11 months of 2009.

BY SHIRLEY HENDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS JAVIER ORTIZ

THERE IS A PROBLEM IN OUR VILLAGE: Youth violence is escalating in communities around the country and the result has been an increasing death toll among our children. Last year in Chicago, the videotaped fatal beating of 16-year-old honors student Derrion Albert thrust the issue of youth violence into the face of America. Derrion was an innocent bystander, like many of the children who are inadvertently caught in the crossfire of urban violence. The reasons we have been given are many: an increased poverty rate—as high as 42 percent—for children living in single-family homes; easy access to guns; lack of male

role models and counseling programs; and gang conflicts. Now, it's time for solutions. EBONY examines different approaches to combating violence. Some of the methods include a citywide gun turn-in, the manifestation of one artist's creative vision to help heal a school, and a hip-hop church that is taking a powerful message onto the West Side streets of Chicago. One thing is certain: The answers are within our own communities, our churches and our children themselves. It's up to us to both find the solutions and to implement them.



THE CHURCH

| PARENTS UNITE | Members of Purpose Over Pain (above, from left) Ronald Holt, Annette Holt, Denise Reed, Pam Bosley and Alice Thomas-Norris speak out about violence during a gun turn-in. A supporter of Christian hip-hop (middle) gives praise in "The House" in the North Lawndale community of Chicago's West Side.

| FRONT-LINE FIGHTERS | Father Michael Pflieger (above right) pastor of the Faith Community of St. Sabina and determined activist, takes a quiet moment of reflection before leading a press conference and gun turn-in rally in the Auburn Gresham Community. (Right) Pastor Phil Jackson, head of Chicago's Hip-Hop Church "The House", takes to the streets with members after service to rescue at-risk youth.

IN ORDER TO COMBAT VIOLENCE, many churches are redefining their roles and saving more than souls

ON THE EVE OF MOTHER'S DAY, about 20 moms joined police, volunteers and local politicians inside a South Side Chicago church transformed into an unlikely gun depository. The gun turn-in took place in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood and was part a citywide effort, fueled by a stream of anonymous faces relinquishing firearms—rifles, handguns, automatic weapons, BB guns and even a bayonet—in exchange for prepaid gift cards.

Among the mothers present was Tonya Burch, mother of Deontae Smith, who was 19 when he was shot and killed last year. According to the Illinois Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, there were 216 children and young people (ages 0 to 25) murdered in Chicago from January to November 2009.

Burch, a petite woman with locks pulled back from her face and a feisty personality, recounted the tragic circumstances that led to her son's murder.

On a hot Saturday night in August, Deontae was among a group of about 150 kids attending an unauthorized block party in the Englewood area of Chicago. A fight broke out between two girls. Suddenly, someone began shooting. Deontae was shot in the chest and killed.

Burch offered a \$6,000 reward for information that would lead to the capture of her son's killer. She also placed three billboards in areas around the city—all baring an image of a copper-complexioned young man with twinkling eyes and a playful grin. Almost a year later, she can still be seen handing out fliers in her neighborhood; each piece of paper is distributed with a bit of hope that someone who knows the identity of the shooter will break the street's "code of silence."

"You can't clean up your neighborhood if you don't work with police," points out Burch, who appeared on an episode of *America's*

Most Wanted this year along with a group called Purpose Over Pain. The group consists of parents who have lost children to street violence. She remembers her son as a nice young man who once dressed up like Superman for a school contest. "He thought he was cool. He thought he could dress. He thought he was a comedian," she recalls.

Hundreds of Deontaes have been the subject of news stories about slain children, and that angers Father Michael L. Pflieger. Dressed in a "I am a SNITCH" T-shirt, the stalwart activist and leader of the Faith Community of St. Sabina, one of the 22 gun turn-in locations in the city, wants to not only ban assault weapons, he is also proposing through the Blair Holt Firearm Licensing and Record of Sales Act of 2009 that individuals who buy guns be required to register them with the state by manufacturer identification numbers.

Despite Chicago's 28-year-old handgun ban, which is currently being reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court, it's extremely easy to buy a handgun on the street. And cheap. Anyone wanting to purchase a 9mm gun, for example, can do so on the street for a shocking \$20.

Further complicating the youth violence issue are other social and economic factors: lack of access to extracurricular programs and after-school activities; impoverished communities; parents without proper parenting skills; and the inability among young people to resolve conflict without violence.

"It's another component to the problem," says Pflieger, "the anger that many young people have. We all have to help [young people] process anger. We have to teach in our schools, in our families and in our churches, conflict resolution. I believe that in this age in which anger is so rampant, we need to teach conflict resolution from preschool through senior year in high school. ... You have to understand that we've taught violence. We've taught it through TV. We've taught it

through videos. Look what happened with 9/11. You hurt us, and, bam! We bomb you! So we've taught—as a nation—violence. Now we have to teach nonviolence. And that's what Dr. King said back in the '50s and '60s. And here we are in 2010 with all this violence, because we failed to teach conflict resolution."

"What angers me is when a child comes to me and says, 'Father, pray for me because I'm afraid to go to school. I'm afraid that I'm going to get shot. I am sleeping under my bed because I am afraid of getting shot in my house,'" says Pflieger, who lost one of his three adopted sons, 17-year-old Jarvis, to gun violence. "A child is afraid to walk the streets, to sit on the porch, play in the yard or go to the park because adults won't be adults and face their fears. I accept a child being afraid; I will not accept adults being afraid. A child should not have to deal with these issues of violence because we adults don't know how to deal with them."

It's common for daily conflicts to flare up on the city's West Side, and on a balmy Saturday evening in the North Lawndale neighborhood, about five miles west of the Chicago Loop, the atmosphere pulsates with an energy fed by the voices of young men in white T-shirts and baggy jeans calling out to passersby on a busy corner. The shrillness of an ambulance siren combines with nonstop car traffic. The noise all but drowns out a group of children playing near a busy street as dusk melts into night.

A peaceful respite from the chaos outside can be found right in North Lawndale, a magnet for crime and an area where members of the Vice Lord Nation gang maintain a stronghold.

Known simply as The House (Covenant Church) or the Hip-Hop Church, it's headed by Pastor Phil Jackson and attracts hundreds of teenagers each month in search of a Saturday night outlet.

"J-J-J-J-Jesus," yells an MC to the 80-or-so-member crowd. "YEAH!" the audience responds in the call-and-refrain song that brought many people to their feet.

"You better praise His name," says the MC.



Kenneth Bradley, 30, is a rapper/MC who has been heating up performances at The House for five years with hip-hop beats and Christian lyrics.

"It's a safe haven for them," says Bradley, who goes by the stage name of Lyve Martyr. "They pretty much know Pastor Phil. It's our job to get them here so that they can hear the Word."

After a free concert, a spoken-word reading and a short sermon by Jackson, members of his group go out into the neighborhood to talk with gang members and offer them Christ. Other members of the group stay behind to pray.

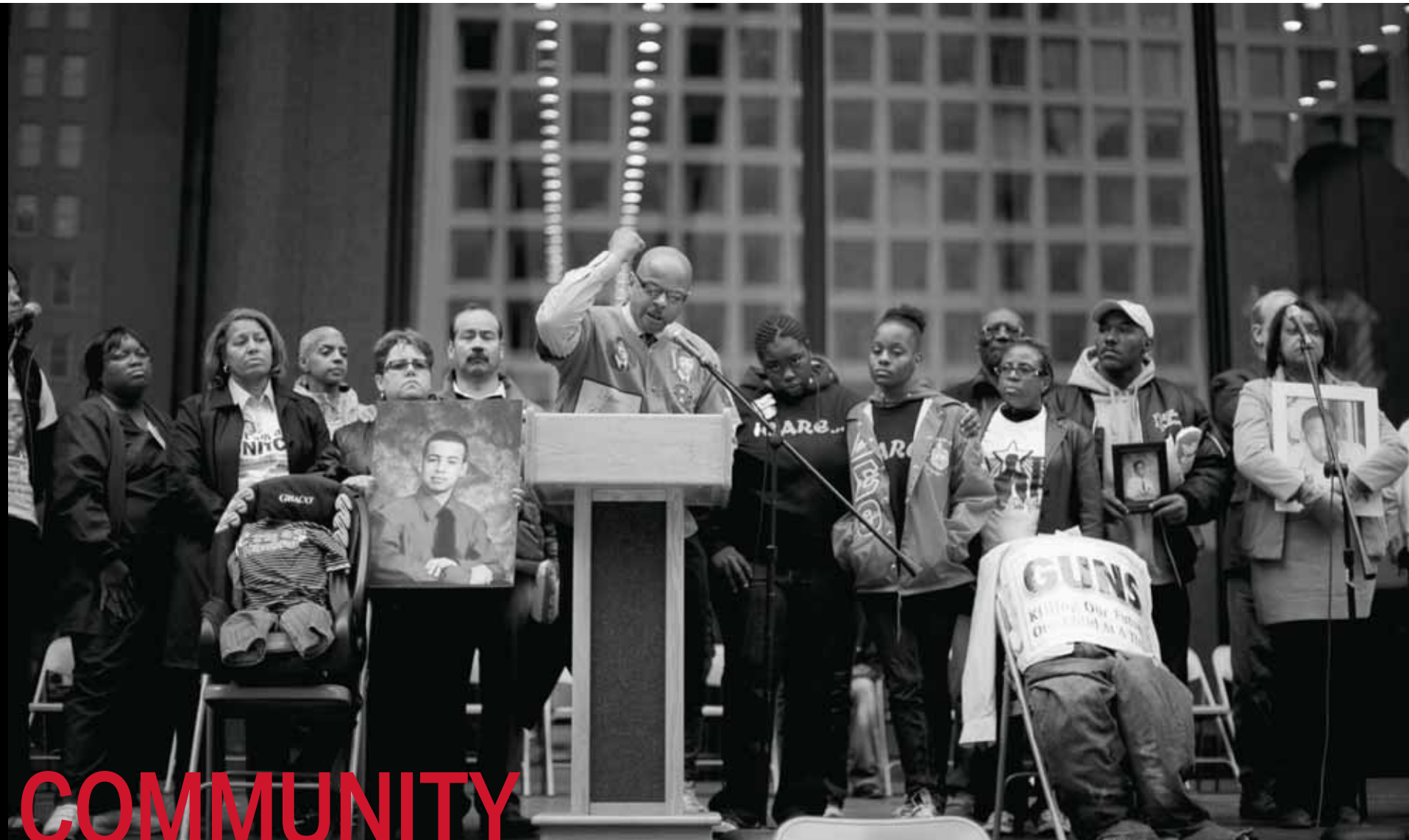
Sometimes Jackson's group is successful, as in the case of Kevin, a 16-year-old former member of the Traveling Vice Lords, a sect of the gang.

"Pastor Phil is like a dad to me," says Kevin. "He gives me tutoring and jobs so that I can stay off the street."

Jackson is trying to rescue more youth from the neighborhood's crime-infested streets. He's currently seeking funding as he remodels an old firehouse and turns it into a youth community center. "Kevin never had anybody listen to him before. He lives in a complex situation at home, but we offer him another [option]," says Pastor Phil. "He knows that I have his back. You have to have this kind of tenacity of care with kids. You have to say, 'I'm not going to let go of this kid.'" □

[RALLY FOR JUSTICE]

Ronald Holt, founder of Purpose Over Pain and father of slain student Blair Holt, joins parents, students and other demonstrators at an anti-violence rally in downtown Chicago in front of Daley Plaza. Among the members of Purpose Over Pain is Tonya Burch (third from right), mother of 19-year-old Deontae Smith, who was shot and killed last year.



THE COMMUNITY



[DRASTIC MEASURES]

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder and Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley attend a press conference at the request of President Obama. Holder was sent to Chicago after the death of Fenger High School student Derrion Albert.



Left, mock bodies lay on the ground of Daley Plaza, marked with police tape, as a part of the anti-violence demonstration.

ESTABLISHING THE VILLAGE: Individuals and organizations offer workable strategies to end violence

INSIDE CHRISTIAN FENGER HIGH SCHOOL, students, joined by family, faculty and friends, sat in a peace circle.

The rule of the peace circle is that the person who currently has the talking piece—in this case, an African hand-painted wooden egg—is allowed to speak. Everyone will get a turn. Tonight's discussion is the creation of a mosaic installation that lines the walls of the school's cafeteria. The 700-square-foot artwork features orange and green tiles, a mirrored centerpiece design, photos and empowering words, such as "respect," "family" and "dreams."

Last year, Fenger's reputation was fractured like so many pieces of a mosaic due to a video that went viral on the Internet showing a group beating 16-year-old honors student Derrion Albert to death.

When artist Carolyn Elaine heard about what happened at Fenger, her alma mater, she decided to help. She came up with the idea of getting students involved with creating a piece of art and then began the task of getting permission and raising money for the project. Over the months, the mosaic became a unifying force and a creative catharsis after the tragedy forced the school and its students into a media fishbowl.

"When Derrion was killed, there was wall-to-wall media," recalls

Elaine. "The goal [of this project] was to show the other side of Fenger students. No one has asked them how they felt about what happened. We met in peace circles because I wanted there to be some sort of mentoring as well."

The result: Peace circles formed all around the school with students speaking candidly about their feelings.

"Miss Elaine didn't know when she came what to expect. She came back to [our] school. She took a risk," said one student.

Another student, who had lost a friend to violence, expressed a desire to end conflict in the community. "I'm just tired of everybody dying."

A survey of 13- to 18-year-olds conducted by TRU, a firm that studies trends among young people, last year showed that 28 percent of teens said that they know a young person who has threatened to kill someone with a gun; 12 percent said that at least one student from their school has been killed by gun violence in the past year. According to mental health professionals, 77 percent of youth who witness a school shooting and 35 percent of youth exposed to community violence are likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Mental health professional Eric V. Harwell, M.A., has seen many such cases. "Most PTSD in children often gets misdiagnosed. You don't

know right away. The effects of trauma on the brain are mind blowing," says Harwell, who has counseled young victims of Hurricane Katrina. "When kids are younger, the brain will map itself to keep moving."

Harwell's mentoring program, P.I.E.S., which stands for Physical Intellectual Emotional Social Development, embraces children from at-risk neighborhoods. One of his mentees is 13-year-old Michael Henderson, who lives in Chicago's Auburn Gresham neighborhood. Michael witnessed the shooting of both his older brother and his cousin in two separate incidents. While his brother survived, his cousin did not.

Today, Michael is receiving encouragement and life skills through P.I.E.S. "They talk about violence and how to stop it," says the eighth grader. "I'd like to see more adults participate in helping stop violence."

"CeaseFire, an initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention that helps resolve conflict, has been working in various communities in Chicago and around the country for years. It approaches urban violence as a public health issue and combats the widespread problem by training and dispatching individuals known as Violence Interrupters to handle interpersonal discord and gang-related conflict. In some Chicago neighborhoods where CeaseFire has been present, such as Auburn Gresham and Humboldt Park, the number of shootings has declined.

Tio Hardiman, director of CeaseFire Illinois, says that in Fenger High School incident, the tension between students from the Ville

community and those from the Altgeld Gardens housing development had been mounting for years.

"The school did not call us to try to help resolve things," says Hardiman. "Everybody was talking about a conflict there. It had reached a head. We would have taken the sticks out of the hands of the individuals. Part of the problem is that this was acceptable behavior by the youth. It was also learned behavior."

Due to the fact that in today's society it has now become normal for young people to pick up a gun or other weapon to resolve conflict, Uhlich Children's Advantage Network (UCAN), a social service organization founded in 1896, is helping at-risk youth and their families deal with trauma.

To mentor young men without fathers or male role models, Claude Robinson, executive VP, external affairs and diversity for UCAN, points to Project Visible Man, a youth-empowering program for young men of color between the ages 13 to 26.

"Gun violence is a moral disease that is America's problem," says Robinson. "You know the saying: 'When America catches a cold ...' We are the ones most affected by this problem."

We are also the ones who are going to have to fix it.

"It takes the whole village," says Harwell. "Police are not going to make the change. Police provide crowd control. People are the ones who will have to make the change." □



THE FUTURE

The seldom-heard voices of our young people express hope, heartache and some possible answers to ending violence



GERALD SPRATTLIN, 22

I [have been] part of a gang since I was 7 or 8 years old. If you are part of a family with members who are chiefs, you become a gang member. I shot a real gun at age 11. At that time, we [were] having fun. I moved to Memphis to live with my father when I was 13 or 14. My father wasn't into the gang life, but by that time, that's what I knew. I started a gang in Memphis. Later, when I returned to Chicago, I got into Kids Off the Block [a community group founded in 2003 by Diane Latiker in her home]. I played basketball with Miss Diane, but I also had this addiction to guns. I carried a 9mm and a 45 with 30-shot clips. One day I had a gun on me and I went to her house. I was going to do a hit. I ended up talking to Miss Diane for two hours. I forgot about the hit. That was the last time I thought about pulling a gun.

KEVIN, 16

I was in a gang known as the Traveling Vice Lords on the West Side. I became a Vice Lord when I was 8 years old. They knew that I knew how to fight. I was in the gang for eight years, but I got tired of gangbanging. The new generation [doesn't] care about what they do; they just do it. I would tell [other kids] to ignore the peer pressure. They [aren't going to] listen; they [are going to] find out the hard way. I have a little brother who is 11. I keep him from the gang. All of the gangs know me.

KEITH BYRD, 17

I was 12 years old when I got involved with UCAN. I got involved with being a teenage volunteer for Project Visible Man. Having a big brother and having a father figure, for a young boy, it makes a difference. My mother was a single parent with seven kids. I have two younger brothers (ages 14 and 15) who are out of control. My one brother is mad because his daddy isn't here. He told me, "The streets are my daddy."

ANTHONY BERRY, 30

I was born and raised in [the] Cabrini Green [housing project] and [the] East Rogers Park [neighborhood]. I have shot people, sold guns, bought guns. I was known as the middleman. I would put "A" and "B" together and I would "C" a profit. I made from \$1,000 to \$10,000 a day. I had a crate of 9mm guns. I had a buddy who gets them off the boat. I'd keep the tip. I've seen it all. I feel I have to make a change for my sons [ages 11 and 1]. I have to continue to be their hero. I used to be the little boy with the BB guns 22 years ago. Today when I turned in my guns, I got a little weight off my chest. What people don't understand is that it's not just a Black problem or Hispanic problem. It's a human problem.

LAVELLE ALFORD, 17

I dropped out when I was 16. I started hanging out with older people. I regret dropping out; I've been through [a] GED program. I am a youth leader now. I don't get paid for this. When I was younger, I saw seventh-grade students flip an ounce for \$200. It was the kids in grammar school who were Gangster Disciples. Most of the young kids are generational members of gangs.

JASMINE PARROTT, 17

We built a memorial to the 1966 Dr. King march in Gage Park. It started as a simple argument with our [Gage Park High School] teacher, Mr. [Victor] Harbison, and a student. We walked past the area where Dr. King marched and we had to do something about it. Since we are in the technology age, we wanted to do something up to date. Everything is electronic now, so we did a wifi kiosk. There is a 32-inch touch screen that shows footage of the [Civil Rights] marches and color photos that were donated. I was proud to do something for the community that's positive.

BRYAN MINCEY, 17

They should start more organizations like CeaseFire to stop the violence.

BEATRICE HERNANDEZ, 17

If you work together, you can actually accomplish something together in the community. When we [Gage Park students] wanted to put up the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial, I never thought anybody would listen to our voices. They usually think [badly] of us.

JAMES ALFORD, 18

In order to stop the violence with young people, we need to get guns off the street. If they have guns, they feel empowered to go rob people.

LATRICE JONES, 18

Our teacher, Mr. Harbison, tells you how it is on the street. I didn't know that Dr. King marched in our [Gage Park] neighborhood during the '60s. No one brought it up. At first, I didn't believe it. ... Our teacher teaches us how to stop the violence through education. We need more teachers like him so that we can fight violence.

THE GANG PROBLEM

How it began ...

THE CITY OF BIG SHOULDERS continues to show strain with a weighty issue. In 2009, 458 homicides were recorded in Chicago; New York City, with a population three times larger, had 471 murders. While police reports show that in 2009 the homicide rate in Chicago was down 11 percent from the previous year, compared with other major cities, Chicago has an elevated murder total.

"One reason that Chicago has so many homicides is due to a 40-plus-year history of gangs," says Tio Hardiman, director of CeaseFire Illinois.

That history includes the oldest Black street gang, known as the Vice Lord Nation, which began in 1958 in St. Charles, Ill., a western suburb, where a group of juveniles attending the Illinois State Training School for Boys banded together. One of the young men who attended the school for errant boys in 1969 was Benny Lee (pictured above), a former high-ranking general of the Vice Lords who worked closely with Willie Lloyd, the founder of one of the 26 sects of the street organization.

"Back in that era, you had [the] Civil Rights and Black Power [Movements]," says Lee. "The street gangs used to run the drug dealers out of the neighborhoods. Then in the '70s, many of the gang leaders were locked up. There was hierarchy to the street gangs. The young guys today, there is no structure, no accountability. When I ran as the chief of a certain group, I couldn't do what I wanted to do. There was accountability to the older Vice Lords. Now, that structure has been destroyed. The culture has changed."

Part of that cultural shift in the 1970s included intense rivalries with other gangs, such as the Gangster Disciples, the largest gang in the city; the Blackstone Rangers, later renamed the El Rukns; and the Latin Kings.

Today, Lee uses his knowledge of gangs to help anti-violence groups such as CeaseFire. He works with Violence Interrupters, members of communities who are trained by CeaseFire to deal with conflict resolution, anger management and gang rivalries.

What does he feel it will take to stop the violence in our communities?

"It's going to take some of these [violent] individuals to die off," says Lee. "We are going to have to start with the young kids at the elementary level. A lot of them are conditioned to see violence." □