

One Life at a time

Social services activist Richard Garland brings “juice” to a new program that puts ex-cons on the street to stop brutal violence before lives are lost. By Jim Davidson Photography by Steve Mellon

Adrienne Young offers a cherished image of her son, Javon, gunned down a decade ago in the last epidemic of street violence involving youth in Pittsburgh. Young went on to found Tree of Hope, a faith-based agency that serves families and children devastated by senseless killings.



The story is familiar now. A dispute over turf, money, girls, pride or next to nothing is replayed again and again on the streets of Pittsburgh — streets now marked with the ferocity, the violence, the tragedy that can bring down a neighborhood when young people have guns. ❖ Adrienne Young knows about it all too well. On a night just before Christmas 10 years ago, her 18-year-old son, Javon Thompson, an artist who had just finished his first semester at Carnegie Mellon University, was visiting a friend’s apartment in East Liberty. “He was successful. He had never done anything to anyone. He was an artist and writer — he was a great child,” Young says now. That night, Benjamin Wright, a robber dressed in gang colors, burst into the apartment and icily ordered Thompson to “say his last words.” Gunshots rang out, killing Thompson and wounding two others. Wright, who later confessed that he shot Thompson and robbed him for failing to show proper respect to his Bloods street gang, is serving a life sentence. ❖ But the carnage from the violence extends well beyond the victims and the shooter. More lives have been diminished from that impulsive act than anyone would want to count. One of those is Thompson’s daughter — Young’s granddaughter — who was born a month later. Today, she is among nearly 430 Pittsburgh children on the rolls of Tree of Hope, the faith-based agency Young started five years ago to serve families and children left behind by these killings. The number grows by an average of 60 to 70 each year.



“I purposely kept my connections to the streets because if I lost that I lost everything.”

Richard Garland Executive Director, One Vision, One Life

Richard Garland takes a call in his “office,” a street corner on Pittsburgh’s North Side, while Talli Thompson stays tuned to goings-on. The core of the foundations-funded anti-violence program is street intelligence.

Richard Garland knows it doesn’t have to be this way. As executive director of the anti-violence program One Vision, One Life, he not only has a plan to rein in the violence; he also has what he calls “the juice” to bring lawbreakers and law enforcers to the same table with the shared goal of preventing the violence through early intervention. When there’s trouble, Garland says, “the kids on the street say ‘Get the dude with the dreads. He understands where we’re at.’”

The initiative, he says, is about “getting in front of it,” about “empowering people in the community to keep the community safe.” The approach has some swagger in it, not unlike Garland himself. Its cornerstone is a cadre of ex-cons and graduates of street life, each an in-your-face public service announcement with this message: Tough guys can go straight, too. Most are big and fearless, yet their goal is to step into situations before violence breaks out. Where there’s conflict, Garland says, “The question is: Can you go in and squash it?”

Garland is a youthful 51, a dreadlocked ex-con up from the streets. “All my friends are dead except me,” he says, recounting his hoodlum days in Philadelphia in the 1970s. “Gang war, drugs, alcohol, that kind of stuff.” He came out of Western Penitentiary in 1991 as a 38-year-old who had spent more than half his life behind bars. Among the conditions of his parole: stay out of Philadelphia. So he settled in Pittsburgh and parlayed his prison G.E.D. into a bachelor’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh and then, in 1996, a master’s in social work.

In the past 13 years, working through a long line of social service gigs, Garland has become the go-to guy for Pittsburgh’s anti-violence initiative. He’s known as one man who has the ear of people in the schools, the police, the district attorney’s office and — most important of all — the young men barely out of grade school who persist in shooting one another and catching bystanders in the crossfire. If Pittsburgh’s streets are safer five years from now, it will mean Richard Garland and people like him will have made strides in talking sense to the combatants.

To stay in the conversation, Garland has recruited more than 20 outreach workers to serve as the eyes and ears of their neighborhoods. In the parlance of another war, they are intelligence gatherers with meaty forearms.

“I’m just like these guys,” Garland says. They are as young as 19 and as old as 37, and most have served time in prison for offenses involving drugs, guns or both. Garland wants to bring them back into a system that marginalizes them. Living back in their old neighborhoods, they find that their antennas are still tuned to the frequencies of the street. Garland, in reaching out and inviting them aboard, acknowledges their outlaw pasts and offers another way. “Here’s a shot at getting out of all the craziness and being part of the solution,” Garland says. “You have to include these guys.”

Through funds supplied mainly by The Heinz Endowments and several other local foundations, the outreach workers are paid \$1,000 per month as youth counselors and standby interventionists, in case disputes arise. So far, they’re based in four city neighborhoods — North Side, the Hill District, St. Clair Village and Beltzhoover, each with an alarming homicide rate and hard feelings toward its near neighbor. On good days, the outreach workers are the ligament connecting law enforcement with human services and health services. And when gunshots fly, the job of Garland and the outreach workers is to insert themselves into the situation, working with law enforcement, the schools and human services to de-escalate the potential violence and perhaps broker a solution.

Reginald Ward is one of the outreach workers. At 6-foot-3 and 310 pounds, he’s an imposing figure, a former Carrick High defensive end who grew up in St. Clair Village and served five years on a drug conviction. He’s now 37 and has been out of prison for nearly seven years. “A lot of us in our group,” Ward says, “didn’t come up in that gang-banging kind of era,” meaning the peak gang years of the 1990s. “We came up before that, and when it came, we knew how to maneuver through it.” Ward tells his story to kids, a personal story. “I did have cars

and two houses, women, jewels, money and all that stuff, but look at me now. I'm catching the bus just like you."

He also makes sure they understand the conditions of his parole. After coming out of prison in January 1998, he had to pay three visits per week to an officer, undergo urine tests twice a week and attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings regularly. He also had a curfew. He expects his parole to end in December, but, until then, he's still keeping monthly appointments and undergoing drug tests. "There's times when I have to stop off at the parole office and give a urine [sample]. I tell the kids they're not the only ones that have to follow rules. When they see that I've been giving a urine, they see it's not that bad."

"It sounds easy when I tell it now, but it was hard," Ward says. Two weeks out of prison, he landed a job as a dishwasher at Bob's Country Kitchen in Lawrenceville. He worked his way up to cooking and then moved on to two Downtown restaurants, relying on kitchen skills he learned at his mother's elbow. "I had a little clipping when I was incarcerated," Ward explains. "It said 'There's no such thing as menial work.'" The motto served him well as he landed jobs two and three by knocking on the doors of every restaurant along three miles of Penn Avenue between Lawrenceville and Downtown, first on the right side of the street and then on the left. "Whatever came down the pipeline I was gonna take," he says.

For the anti-violence initiative to succeed, Garland and the outreach workers need a quality they describe as "juice." Others may call it "clout," "standing," "pull," "street cred" or other terms not printable here, but Garland prefers "juice." Without juice, he wouldn't have the ability to do what he does and be what he is, a man who keeps in his head the cell phone numbers of hustlers, ex-cons, CEOs, school principals and teenagers courting serious trouble. "I purposely kept my connections to the streets, because if I lost that I lost everything," Garland says. As he well knows, it takes finesse and careful navigation to walk this line. A wrong move, an inadvertent remark, a failed confidence can have dire — even fatal — consequences.

And that, for Garland, is the bottom line: A record-breaking 125 homicides were recorded in Allegheny County last year, according to county coroner's records. Many of these fall under the purview of the One Life program — senseless and avoidable

— as one knucklehead picked up a gun after being dissed, threatened, slighted, insulted, cheated or robbed by another knucklehead much like himself. If youth violence is a disease — and a lethal one at that — Garland is pioneering a treatment that calls for early intervention, careful follow-up and expert after-care. The strong medicine he carries is his belief that, by picking up the gun at 13, 14, 15, 16, young people are getting too comfortable handling weapons. They're kissing futures goodbye without even understanding what that loss means.

Indeed, the numbers show a grim accounting. Last year, a third of Pittsburgh's homicide victims were 20 years old or under, and nearly two-thirds were 30 or under. As pins on a city map, they clustered most heavily in the Hill District and the North Side, with about 45 percent of the homicides either taking place there or involving residents. According to U.S. Census data, Pittsburgh has the seventh highest percentage — 18.3 percent — among the 70 largest U.S. cities of black youth, age 16–25, who are neither in school nor in the labor force, a statistic beyond alarming. But social service workers and police familiar with the most troubled neighborhoods don't need numbers to know that unskilled and uneducated young people have few hopeful prospects.

The foundation community has been down this road before. The last spike in urban violence came in 1993, with 118 deaths involving mostly young men fighting over crack cocaine sales territory, but also petty pride issues. The strategic response from local philanthropists, law enforcement agencies and elected officials was to set up the Youth Crime Prevention Council, which, under the leadership of Fred Thieman, then U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania, became a leading force in developing community-centered family support, early childhood education and neighborhood mobilization. Applied together, the programs helped to sharply reduced violent incidents.

"The response was reactive, as a large community effort tends to be, but it was focused on doing whatever it takes to reduce the numbers of young lives lost," says Marge Petruska, director of the Endowments' Children, Youth & Families Program. "Our experience taught us that collaborating on a crisis problem like youth violence is key to bringing down the

VIOLENT CRIME IN PITTSBURGH

Is violence an epidemic in Pittsburgh? The answer is a resounding, "Yes!" if you are a teen-aged or young adult African-American male living in any one of a dozen city neighborhoods. This graphic shows the high-homicide areas of Pittsburgh. The yellow dots mark homicide victims in the neighborhoods covered by the One Vision, One Life Program.

167

If you are a black male between the ages of 15 and 30 living in any one of six high-crime neighborhoods in the city of Pittsburgh, you face a homicide rate that is 167 times the national average of 5.7 per 100,000 population.

62

An age analysis of all homicide[®] victims in Allegheny County last year shows that 62 percent of all victims were 30 or younger; a third were 20 or under.

21

A breakdown of the number of homicides by Allegheny County neighborhood shows that the North Side had the highest — 21 violent deaths — which includes 9 cases where the victim was 25 or under, the highest for the county in that category as well.

numbers. Even though the situations are different now and the times are different, we have a successful model for strategic programming. One Vision is the updated version of that," says Petruska, which places much more responsibility on the program's leaders.

For six years starting in 1997, Garland was executive director of YouthWorks, a county agency with a \$2 million annual budget and a mission centered on job placement for at-risk and economically disadvantaged youth from 14 to 25 years old. The experience took Garland into dozens of Pittsburgh's schools and many of its boardrooms, and he says it taught him how to use his influence in securing opportunities for teenagers, whether that meant appealing to a potential employer, the police or the district attorney. "It's about who I have at the table," Garland says. "There are guys at the table, if I didn't bring this together, four or five wouldn't be here." Rather than getting the services they need, they would just be back in prison, he says. "All I do is connect the dots. I'm good at connecting the dots."

Thieman, U.S. Attorney from 1993 to 1997, now an attorney in private practice and a director at the Endowments, has known Garland since the mid-1990s when Garland was working as a violence prevention coordinator training school officials and social service workers. From the beginning, Thieman was impressed by Garland's ability to connect with youth, with adults, with governmental officials, with the 16-year-olds on the corner. "Anyone in the community who's been here for a

while, dealing with kids, knows Richard has credibility with them. People in law enforcement know Richard's word is good, and he's got a track record with them, too."

Having credibility on both sides of the line has been especially important in recent years as the homicide rate has jumped. There are many more dots to connect, particularly in the city, particularly among African Americans.

Nate Harper, assistant chief of operations for the Pittsburgh Police, believes the One Vision, One Life approach is working. As evidence, he cites an incident last spring when a dozen outreach workers cooled a situation at a downtown under-18 club, and he cites North Side crime statistics that are down a few points this year, unlike areas not yet reached by the program. "They've been very helpful. It appears to be working," Harper says.

Harper wasn't so sure about the program last spring when he brought in Garland and all 20 outreach workers to meet with about 20 police detectives and supervisors. "His people sat on one side of the room and the police sat on the other side, and I was thinking, 'Is this a good idea?' But you know what? We're after the same goal — get after the violent act, the criminal act. Be proactive and not reactive." He says police have been able to step back and accept the outreach workers' role as an independent force. "A lot of times, police say all we want you to do is give us information. We've been saying that for years and it isn't working," says Harper. But he believes the new

program is. “The young men and adults we weren’t able to reach, they were able to reach,” Harper says. “They have an advantage. It’s the fact they’ve been there, done that, and have seen the light for whatever reason, and they know the street is not what it’s glorified to be.”

Asked to compare the new approach to community policing efforts of the ’90s, Thieman says, “Community policing has always been more of a concept than a reality. Community policing is no different from what I said about Richard — it’s as good as the people doing it.” The problem, he says, is that most police departments nationwide have failed to institutionalize community policing by making it an integral function of police work. “They were a separate division, seen as the social workers of the police department.”

Marc Cherna is director of the county Department of Human Services as well as director of the Allegheny County Violence Prevention Initiative, which in either case makes him Garland’s boss. “We’re off to a pretty good start,” Cherna says. “I think we’ve seen a decline in the violence. Police in the four areas are giving [the program] credit for helping to reduce the number of incidents, but it takes time. We’re not going to eliminate the violence, but we can do something to reduce it.”

Cherna talks about One Vision, One Life in operational terms, as a new county program being given the support and resources it needs if it is to become sustainable. “We’re trying to be clear — we can’t intervene in every incident.” Or in every neighborhood — at least not yet. “To do this right, you have to do it one step at a time. The worst thing is starting something and having to shut it down six months later.”

Garland and the outreach workers aren’t being asked to do it all alone. “We have so many resources,” Cherna says, ticking off a list that includes mental health services, drug treatment, employment training and housing support. “I also want to put a pitch in for the foundations, for having the foresight to take these issues on. There are no guarantees.” He pauses. “But you’ve got to try.”



Photo courtesy of Tree of Hope

Richard Garland, second from left, checks in with outreach workers, from left, Talli Thompson, L.G. Wilson and Lenell Hughes at Columbus Middle School on Pittsburgh’s North Side. Below center, young members of Tree of Hope, which serves families of young people lost to senseless violence, participate in an art therapy class.

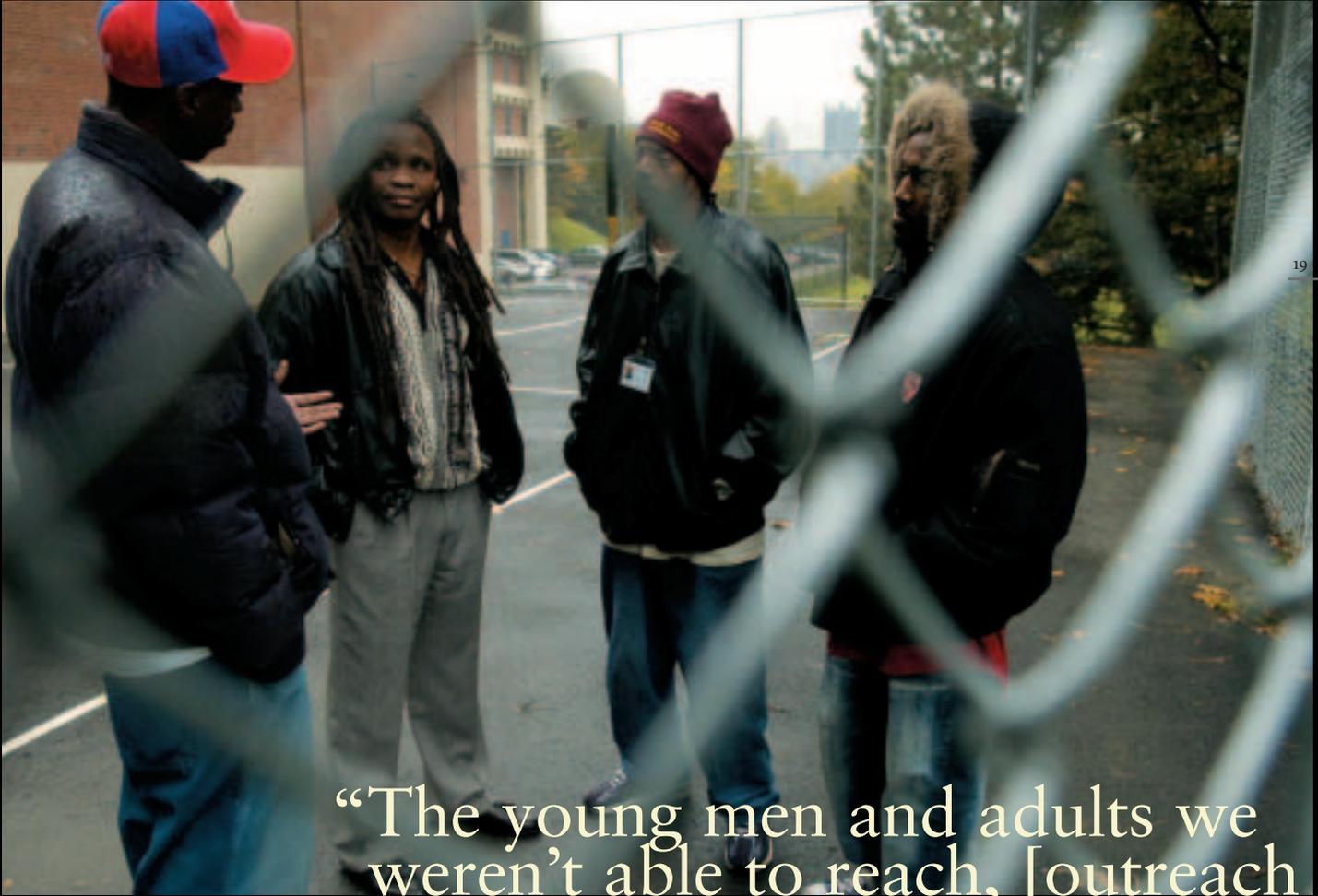
As one of those foundation board members who approved a grant to support the One Vision program, Thieman also advises funders to be patient. “It’s a noble experiment, and like any experiment you have to give the test tube and the catalyst time to

work.” Three to five years down the line, he says, the city should know whether it’s working.

Community support remains an important determiner of success. Tree of Hope, where the bulk of the budget comes from about 20 mostly African-American churches, is serving families and children “affected by a traumatic loss of loved ones through homicide, suicide, assault and crimes” by providing programs and services that include support groups, weekly art therapy sessions, scholarships, a new children’s choir, court advocacy and a Christmas gift program. There are also public events such as last summer’s Crusades Against Crime presentations in many communities, and a new Tree of Hope children’s choir now starting under the direction of Rev. Ralph Hill. “If we don’t all band together and rescue this younger generation,” Adrienne Young says, “we’re going to see another generation of mayhem and havoc.” Asked what it would take to make Tree of Hope unnecessary, she answers, “We’d have to get rid of the guns, the ignorance, the hopelessness, the poverty. That’s what it would take. I’d love to be put out of business.”

Down the line, Garland sees One Vision, One Life relying less on him and more on the talents of the outreach workers coming up through the organization. One pressing goal, he says, is to recruit women to work as outreach workers to young women. “We’re building a cadre of people so it no longer becomes a Richard Garland thing. I see a lot of Richards out there,” he says.

“We’re building a system that answers violence — a system coming from the streets and not from law enforcement. It’s a balancing act.” If they all do their jobs and use their influence wisely, Garland trusts that his message will finally sink into the hard heads who most need to get it. He tells it to them straight, no chaser: “If I do what’s right, right’s gonna take care of me.” *h*



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