

Cincinnati's Initiative to Reduce Violence
The CIRV "Call-In": Reflections on a Profound Experience

I saw something profound today.

I saw the same players and actors, those nameless, faceless people who make up the good guys and the bad guys and the ordinary guys in any community. They are all different from one another, but they are mirror images of the players and actors in communities all across this nation. They have roles to play, these good guys, bad guys and ordinary guys...and the roles are uniform and consistent throughout America's communities.

But today those roles were played to a different script.

I saw something profound today.

I watched the confused faces of those we commonly call the bad guys—angry young men, almost exclusively African-American, as they filed into a room full of criminal justice professionals, social service providers, and community members. I saw, with exceptional clarity, the fear in their eyes, the apprehension on their faces, soon replaced with seemingly awkward attempts to project confidence, indifference, in some cases, perhaps, hostility. But I saw angry, street-savvy young men who were caught off-guard and struggling to find a comfort zone in what must surely have felt to them like an artificial environment. As they settled into their seats, they attempted to coax from within themselves a more comfortable demeanor while their genuine discomfort collectively and silently resounded across the room. These angry young men, used to being in control in the incredibly brutal environment of the mean streets, were noticeably off-balance and unsure of themselves.

That was profound.

I watched as the first speaker, Dr. Victor Garcia, stood and addressed the group. He was the first to deliver this simple message: "The violence—the killing and the shooting—must stop." He provided startling statistics that supported his claim that black men killing black men has the potential to destroy the black race. He spoke of his personal experiences as a trauma surgeon saving, and losing, the lives of young men and women who are victims of violence. He told the angry young men that he loved them, that they have value to their community, and that they are better than their violent actions imply. It was clear that he wanted more for these familiar strangers than they seemed to want for themselves. I saw a few angry faces soften, almost imperceptibly.

That was profoundly interesting.

I watched as law enforcement, prosecutors, social service providers, and community members addressed the angry young men, most of whom were attentive if for no other reason than to satisfy their curiosity. The speakers talked about consequences resulting from remaining in a violent lifestyle, but they spoke just as eloquently and passionately—perhaps more so—about how to exit the cycle of violence. They offered assistance, and expressed feelings of personal faith, community hope, and love for the angry young men. I saw the faces of a few young men appear slightly less angry. I saw a few young

men choke back tears. I saw in the eyes of a couple of young men the tears of a painful existence—the tears that come from the realization that reality and truth have just intersected within one’s consciousness; perhaps tears reflecting a recognition that they could dare to be hopeful about their future. I saw one young man raise his shackled hands above his head and exclaim “I never knew there was this much love out there...seriously, I never knew it.” I saw several young men openly express a desire for respite from the pressures of their violent lifestyle. With a shrug of his shoulder, feigning nonchalance, one of the most angry young men said, “I’d like to change because I’m getting older and I’d like to get away from the violence.” Nobody argued for the status quo. Not one young man tried to justify violence, or argue that change was impossible, futile, or that their situation was hopeless.

That is profoundly surprising.

I watched mothers bravely balance their own personal anger and grief on the scales of hope as they tearfully and painfully explained how their sons were murdered and how these murders have affected them, their families, and their communities. I heard mothers describe their experience of emotional survival in the company of the misery that comes with a parent outliving a child. I saw a few young men swallow hard and look away—but they couldn’t stop listening and couldn’t find a suitable distraction to escape the brutality of the truth these women spoke. I saw mothers speak through tears, and I saw young men hang their heads, stare at the ceiling, or simply sit with eyes transfixed on these fearless and charitable women as their words cut mercilessly through the room.

That is profoundly different.

I watched the faces of the law enforcement officers assigned to accompany the young men. I saw a subtle, yet measurable change on their faces as well. Over the course of a couple of hours, their facial expressions changed from those of cynicism or polite boredom to attention and curiosity. In a couple of instances, I saw those public servants struggle to control their emotions, just as I was. I suspect that those law enforcement officers, like me, have had their moments of living the lives of angry young men, too, albeit from a different vantage point than those they were there to protect or guard. Too much anger leads to many harmful emotions, the most common among the protectors probably being best described as hopeless exhaustion. Regardless of our politics or our propensity for honest introspection, somewhere within us we all seek unity and healing. Long ago, we grew weary of living through the experiences of angry young men dying at our feet. I believe I saw recognition in the expressions of those law enforcement officers that maybe there are solutions to what we may have considered insolvable problems. Perhaps the seeds of change were planted in the fertile soil of public service today.

That is profoundly refreshing.

I saw former gang members, convicted murderers, drug dealers—those reformed men and women who now reach out to others as their penance for what they’ve taken in a previous, unrepentant life—speak passionately and eloquently, pleading with the young men to take the help being offered. I saw some of these former criminals weep for the soon-to-be lost young men and maybe in some way for themselves, and then be embraced by society’s elite, both literally and figuratively. The young men saw that, too, and I suspect the significance of that solitary, sincere, and meaningful demonstration of community was not lost on them. And I saw the change that is coming.

It is profound change.

I walked away from this experience transformed from an observer to a participant, born of a renewed sense of hope and the warmth of a newly sparked inner fire. I believe again—I believe that there is hope for the hopeless, healing for the angry, and justice for the community. I believe that lives are being changed and will be changed. I believe that we—the community in its purest form and finest sense--will prevail, through the certain challenges and general messiness that human interactions create, through the inevitable setbacks, and the new obstacles that success itself will bring. We will prevail; we will be stronger, wiser, and more united as a community and, perhaps, eventually, as a people.

This experience was profoundly meaningful.

Michael Blass
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