

# The Plague of Violence in Our Communities and One Way to Stop It

We can solve the epidemic of violence in our communities

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Six years ago I was almost dragged by a social worker from my comfortable Michigan Avenue office to an alternative public high school where he worked. Students suspended from the regular high schools in Cicero, Illinois (the edge of Chicago) for violent behavior, drugs, and poor attendance, arrived at Morton Alternative for their last chance to stay in the school system.

The old converted warehouse, then functioning as the alternative school, greeted visitors with two Cicero Police security guards, a metal detector, a completely committed principal, and teachers trying to do their best with students they often imagined did not want to learn. Cicero has significantly changed since Martin Luther King marched for fair housing in the 1960's. Today the area houses many poor Hispanic and Black families struggling with a poor economy, family strife, and kids understandably seduced by gang promises for connection and respect. The odds are against many of these kids who will not survive their twentieth birthday.

Once sitting in a group session with seven students, stereotypes of "violent gang members," faded quickly. These kids were no different than my own---teenage angst but also with ambitions, and traumatic states that needed understanding and responses by adults who could first be trusted and then who just might "get it."

Looking back I realize that those students, as they allowed me to get to know them, became "my kids". After a year of visiting once a week, Dave and I created an in-school treatment and research program now finishing our fourth year. Through individual psychoanalytic and group treatment, we have been able to significantly reduce levels of depression and anxiety that leads to unregulated aggression, depression, and dysfunction.

Yes, we deal with trauma, current and past, which most students have experienced. But students have taught us that we cannot stop there if we are to be useful in their educative and emotional development. We focus on all students' wish—that's right, every student's wish to move forward in his or her life and often under impossible circumstances. If a student is coming to school and not doing school work, we don't ask why they are not working. We focus on what got them out of bed this morning and what was it that they need from us that brought them to school. And, it's not just teachers, principal and therapists that do this. Security guards and administrative staff have also bought into and participate in this "forward edge" approach we have created.

Once students are genuinely understood in this way, violent behavior is hijacked by the wish to graduate and move forward in life. Sometimes they are the first in their families to graduate high school much less go to college. We are not always successful in our efforts. What keeps us

going? Recently a parent stood up at a meeting to tearfully say, "My son would not be alive today had he not come to this school." Her son graduates in June. Or, when one of our 16 year old girls became pregnant, the school rallied around her and her family in support. She sometimes brings her new baby to school. Nothing will interfere with her goal to graduate a year from now and someday become a nurse. I have no doubt she will succeed.

Don't get taken in by the media and political cynicism that the plague of violence in our communities cannot be overcome. It can---one child at a time, and one child like yours and mine.