

Teny Gross

From: Teny Gross [teny@nonviolenceinstitute.org]
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Edwatch by Julia Steiny: A plea to turn mean streets into a 'beloved community'

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According to Teny Gross, "Boston has 11,000 summer jobs for kids. D.C. has 11,000. Providence has maybe 400, and 37 of them are ours."

By "ours," Gross means jobs offered by the agency he directs, the Institute for the Study & Practice of Nonviolence. The institute focuses much of its effort on urban youth, and summer is a volatile time for high-energy teens. Gross, the institute's executive director, all but gloats over a report by the Justice Policy Institute that found a direct correlation between unemployment rates and incidents of violent crime and juvenile justice referrals. In short, summer jobs reduce street crime.

Gross says, "During the summer, city kids learn how to be in a gang, how to drink, take drugs. Their parents are working and can't be home to watch them. But the kids are still learning. The human mind is always learning, but we leave thousands of kids to learn what they can from the streets in the summer. We've forgotten what childhood is. It's the boot camp of adulthood. And what is boot camp but the place that teaches you the culture of the organization. This is how we do business here. So the summer is absolutely critical."

On Wednesday, Gross stood with Providence's Mayor David Cicilline and Police Chief Dean Esserman at a news conference, urging the business community to either hire kids directly or to create 20-hour-a-week work opportunities that the institute can combine with training in nonviolence, for the "Beloved Community" summer program.

Nonviolence-education programs are the institute's stock in trade. The programs run in the public schools, the Police Academy, the Training School and the Adult Correctional Institutions. For a taste of their message, here's what Gross said recently to a group of fathers in maximum security at the ACI, "We got to stop this pit bull society. You train your boys, your sons, to look hard on the street. I want you to show your boys how to be soft -- crying, laughing. Looking hard doesn't look so tough in the funeral home. Teach them to be soft so they can stay alive. Teach them that learning is what's hard."

As an Israeli, Gross grew up in the midst of war and was himself a soldier, so he added, "Being an Israeli helps on the streets. People know I don't come from soft." (The institute's Web site has more on his personal story -- www.nonviolenceinstitute.org)

But you can't teach peace only by talking about it. Peace in American cities also requires getting out onto the streets themselves and befriending kids. Sadly, the principal education of many young people in urban poverty is on the streets. Poor males may not have money or opportunity, but they have their dignity, which for many is hard won in literal battles -- fistfights, gang warfare and other proving grounds. The currency most valued is a reputation for being tough and hard.

Gross is hell-bent on reshaping that culture by getting as many nonviolence-trained adults as possible out there. He's a nut

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about how badly all kids need close adult relationships. Only when they have personal relationships with peaceful adults will there ever be any hope of turning them away from the real-life violence so irresponsibly glamorized by the entertainment industry.

Gross illustrates the kinds of toxic adult relationships all too available to urban teens by relating what a drug dealer, Sal, told him years ago. "Sal says, 'I'm here in the morning when Johnny goes to school. I'm here when he goes home. His mom gives him a buck to get milk; I give him another for orange juice. I'm here all the time. You're not. I win.'"

So the institute hires streetworkers -- there are 10 now -- to provide alternatives to the Sals of this world. The streetworkers make themselves available to anyone trying to settle a beef; they mentor kids and hang out wherever folks gather in order to learn about potentially explosive parties, feuds, tempers, the flow of drugs and so forth. The institute would dearly love to have 15, but money is a persistent and burdensome problem.

The streetworkers are men and women who themselves grew up steeped in street culture, experts, as it were, on the harsh, macho rules of engagement that quickly escalate to violence if left unchecked. Some have been to jail; some have not. But neighborhoods trust these people. Perpetrators of gun battles and fights have been known to protect streetworkers from harm. Gross believes that the 'hood would never trust people from the outside with the kind of information that helps the workers disarm or stop fights.

Not surprisingly, the streetworkers and the police have rubbed each other wrong, on occasion, but in general, the institute has an excellent working relationship with the police. Gross admires Chief Esserman and appreciates his department's partnership. Gross notes that "even the cops say we can't arrest our way out of this problem. But this country always chooses law enforcement solutions."

Gross would invest in relationships. "The trend in America has been: Let's fund the research and evaluation. So we're funding the thinking class, the chattering classes. But what you need is boots on the ground. And those boots need to be hired from the neighborhoods.

"We need to get off our high horses and get with the kids. When kids drop out, we, the adults, failed them."

No kidding. And in the summer, when most schools are taking a break, business, government and after-school programs need to pick up the slack. Perhaps it's time to invent a youth WPA summer project -- fix up a school, plant a park -- something in which the kids can take ownership, learn useful skills, interact with community adults and be proudly productive. Hopefully, more and more people, businesses and agencies will help Gross and the institute do the job this culture shirks.

Gross can't believe what a low priority kids are in America.

Neither can I.

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