

"Caught in the Cross-Fire"

YouthALIVE Breaks the Cycle of Violence in ED Trauma Victims

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The rate of firearm-related deaths for children under the age of 15 in the United States is almost 12 times higher than in the other 25 leading industrialized countries of the world.¹ The homicide rate for young men aged 15 to 24 is more than ten times higher than in most other industrialized nations.² Gunshot wounds are the leading cause of death in our country for black men ages 15-24.³ In Oakland and in Los Angeles, YouthALIVE is doing something to change these appalling statistics.

YouthALIVE is an international organization dedicated to improving the lives of young people. Deane Calhoun is the founder and executive director of the California chapter. The primary mission of YouthALIVE in California is to prevent youth violence and generate youth leadership in California communities. YouthALIVE accomplishes its mission through a hands on approach that directly involves affected youth in the planning and implementation of its programs.

An outstanding example of a successful YouthALIVE project is its award-winning "Caught in the Cross-Fire" program in Oakland. The idea for "Caught in the Cross-Fire" originated in 1993 when staff at Highland General Hospital contacted Deane Calhoun about the alarming number of young people they were seeing who were victims of interpersonal violence. Emergency physicians and trauma surgeons were weary of patching patients up and sending them out, only to see them return with more serious or even fatal injuries.

"Caught in the Cross-Fire" got off the ground in January 1994 when YouthALIVE

staff member Sherman Spears, who is himself paraplegic as a result of a gunshot wound, began making bedside visits to Highland General patients who were victims of interpersonal violence. Spears recalls, "As a young person from another world, you don't see the doctors and nurses as allies. Friends are the biggest problems — they come in and tell you how you have to get even and retaliate. Because of a friend's argument over five dollars, I got shot, another person died, and another person is in jail. At that time, the resources most available to us were NOT education and NOT jobs, they were guns."



Spears and his fellow staffers at YouthALIVE offer young trauma victims examples of an alternative to the cycle of retaliation and escalating violence that many are caught up in. But "Caught in the Cross-Fire" provides much more than just mentoring at the patient's bedside. According to Nic Bekaert, director of the Oakland "Caught in the Crossfire" program, YouthALIVE also offers comprehensive services to patients after they leave the hospital or ED. These services include providing legal assistance, helping find jobs, and even providing transportation. Spears says of the "Caught in the Crossfire" program, "I am now in a better position to respond in a more positive way to the voices of children and what they want: an excellent education, a better chance for job opportunities, and the opportunity to live in communities that are free of guns, drugs, and violence. They want this not only for themselves, but also for their friends, their communities, and their parents."

"Caught in the Crossfire" works closely

with emergency physicians and trauma surgeons at Highland General. ED staff identify young victims of interpersonal violence as candidates for the program and page YouthALIVE counselors. Bekaert says, "Our response time to the Emergency Department averages about 20-30 minutes. In most cases, we can make contact with patients before they leave the ED." YouthALIVE maintains close contact with patients throughout their hospitalization, if they are admitted, and after discharge from the hospital or ED.

The "Caught in the Crossfire" program has received well-deserved recognition as a model for reducing firearm-related and other interpersonal youth violence. In 1999, Highland General Hospital formally commended YouthALIVE for its contributions. According to Highland ED Director Dr. Barry Simon, "YouthALIVE is a wonderful resource that offers great promise for breaking the cycle of violence in the youth of our community." In 2001, the "Caught in the Crossfire" program received the Norman Cousins award from the Fetzer Institute, a non-profit foundation dedicated to bettering the human condition through support of research, education, and services dealing with the interaction between the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual realms of life. The award, which includes a \$25,000 prize, is named for the late Norman Cousins, author, humanitarian, and longtime editor of the Saturday Review, who called attention to the importance of human relationships to health and healing. In accepting the award, YouthALIVE executive director Deane Calhoun commented, "You never do this kind of work for an award or recognition. You do it and stay with it because it needs to be done, and because you find such good people who have resources and skills to make the program even better."

As a result of its success, "Caught in the Crossfire" is being replicated in other parts of the state and the country. In Oakland, the program has recently expanded to include Children's Hospital. YouthALIVE has a similar program in Los Angeles where, according to Nic Bekaert, the majority of staff members are wheel-chair bound as a result of gunshot wounds. Similar programs are also starting up in Walnut Creek, California; in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and in Washington D.C.

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The "Caught in the Crossfire" program is just one of several important ways in which YouthALIVE is working to help California's youth. Another component of the California YouthALIVE program is Teens on Target (TNT). TNT trains multi-ethnic young people from violent neighborhoods to become youth leaders and teach other students how to reduce violence in their homes, schools, and communities. In Oakland and Los Angeles, TNT youth leaders facilitate interactive workshops with middle and high school students - often presenting at middle schools that they themselves attended - about the causes and effects of violence in their lives, as well as the identification of solutions to reduce and prevent this violence. In Oakland alone, Nic Bekaert estimates that the TNT program reaches 3000 students annually.

Still another component of YouthALIVE is legislative advocacy. YouthALIVE staff identify and work with key decision makers and organizations involved in areas such as media coverage, electoral politics, and neighborhood development. Executive Director Deane Calhoun is presently actively engaged in a products liability action against gun makers. If successful, this action would force firearm manufac-

turers to bear some of the financial burden of gun violence, similar to the way in which the tobacco industry has recently been held accountable for a portion of the health care costs of smoking-related diseases.

Not only do YouthALIVE staff serve as advocates for the young people in their communities, they teach them to be their own advocates. YouthALIVE staff teach young people to work with decision makers, agencies, organizations, and the general public to create policy on violence prevention. They also train youth in the skills needed to positively alter the media's coverage of young people.

The vision of YouthALIVE is not unlike the vision of past CAL/ACEP President Ramon Johnson who wrote in the September 1996 *Lifeline* in a President's Message entitled, "Preventing Violence...A Vision of Hope:"

CAL/ACEP is not just an organization created to preserve economic viability for its membership. There are critical social issues that also must be addressed...Nationwide, more than 500,000 emergency room visits each year are due to violent injury....The economic cost of violence in California is staggering...Perhaps even more important than the dollar cost of violence is the human and social impact of violence that ulti-

mately leads to the devaluation of life and the demoralization of the society....Through health care leadership, we must raise public awareness that violence affects everybody and has to stop."

CAL/ACEP's Injury Prevention Subcommittee salutes YouthALIVE for transforming a vision into a reality. The "Caught in the Crossfire" project is an inspiration to those of us in CAL/ACEP who believe that our own organization should be more involved in violence prevention. The "Crossfire" program also provides an excellent example of how emergency physicians may partner with community organizations to effectively reduce firearm-related and other interpersonal violence. The CAL/ACEP Injury Prevention Subcommittee hopes to partner more closely with YouthALIVE on this and other violence prevention projects in the future.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Rates of homicide, suicide, and firearm related death among children in 26 industrialized countries. *MMWR CDC Surveill Summ* 1997;148:1721-1725.

²Fingerhut LA, Kleinman JC. International and interstate comparisons of homicide among young males. *JAMA* 1990;263:3292-3295.

³National Center for Health Statistics. 1998