

# Fighting Youth Violence One Boy at a Time

By Jody Vilschick

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Vladimir Joseph was left behind. His inner strength and a few helping hands allowed him to catch up, and in turn, extend a helping hand to the current generation of African American boys living the violent life on the streets.

The first time he was left behind, Joseph returned to an empty apartment where he had been living with his mother and sister since his parents were divorced when he was seven years old. His mother and sister moved out, leaving him alone. "I was thirteen and homeless, but I knew my way around," says Joseph. His life on the South Bronx streets, however, soon led to his being attacked, which turned out to be a positive. After a stint in the hospital, he was sent to a shelter. "That got me back to school," says Joseph. "I loved school. I could be myself and kick some academic ass. I could exchange ideas and be safe."

Outside of school, however, he was involved in gang activity. In eleventh grade his life was seriously threatened, and he thought he would have to kill or be killed. "I didn't bother people, but I had my gun when I got caught by the police," says Joseph. "If I didn't get locked up right then, I probably would have killed someone an hour later."

Those were bad times, he remembers. "Crooked cops, friends dying—it was nothing to see people die on the street," he says.

Eventually, he found his way to a group home run by a Catholic priest, who encouraged him to pursue his academic dreams and go to college. He chose Morehouse College. Located in Atlanta, Georgia, it was just about as far away from the streets of the South Bronx as a young boy could get. "In my environment, the only successful Black men were running guns and crack," he says. "At Morehouse, the students' dads were judges and professors."

After graduating from Morehouse, Joseph knew he wanted to help young boys, who, like him, needed a little help and encouragement to escape the violent street life. While working other jobs, he founded Inner Strength in 1996. "The group was just me for a while," he remembers.

The Morehouse College Family Life Center (MCFLC) collaborates with Inner Strength to reduce youth violence and the resulting fear of crime. They do this by providing mentors—college students from Morehouse, Spelman, Morris-Brown, and Clark-Atlanta, all nearby historically black colleges and universities—who share how they stayed out of trouble and turned their lives around. They also take the troubled kids on overnight trips, usually hiking and camping. "We've witnessed that when you take a kid out of his environment and bring him to

a different place and challenge him to look at himself in a different way, change becomes tangible," says Joseph. "You sit in the ghetto and tell him, 'you know you got to do something,' and he'll say, 'yeah, whatever.'"

The MCFLC also conducts a three-week "Summer Academy" for 30 boys, which is designed to sharpen participants' reading and basic math skills, and provide opportunities to focus on career development and job exploration. Field trips and sessions on African American history and current issues help the boys develop a sense of who they are and a better understanding of the history of African Americans in this country.

"We thrive on creating a safe space where kids feel it's okay to be vulnerable and ask questions," says Joseph. "We let them know we'll be there for them."

The MCFLC is part of the Family and Community Violence Program (FCVP), which was developed under a cooperative agreement between the Office of Minority Health and Central State University, in Wilberforce, OH. Its goal is to affect the increasing violence and abusive behavior in low-income, at-risk communities through the mobilization of community partners to address these issues. Now, the FCVP coordinates and directs the activities of Family Life Centers at 24 historically African American colleges and universities, institutions primarily serving Hispanics, Native American tribal colleges and universities, and other minority-focused institutions in 17 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands.

"Every one of these kids has someone in his neighborhood who is a drug dealer and will help him get into that life if he wants to," says Joseph. "We provide another option." ❖

## Violence Among Young Men

- Intentional violence accounts for one-third of all injury deaths in the United States.
- Intentional interpersonal violence disproportionately involves young people as both perpetrators and victims; young males between the ages of 15 and 24 are disproportionately involved in violent acts.
- Among minority youth, particularly African Americans, violence has struck with unique force in recent years. Homicide has been the leading cause of death among African American males between the ages of 15-24 for more than ten years.
- Nationally, in 1999, 83 percent of school homicide or suicide victims were males.



Information source: National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2001

