

**Lives Lost Too Soon...
We Must Stop the
Violence**



**Michigan Chronicle
January 28, 2009**

The Problem

“Youth Paid for Athletic Jacket with His Life.” That was a news headline on January 4, 1991. I remember it like it was yesterday. That headline is forever etched in my memory because the teenager killed was my 14-year old baby brother.

It was the most devastating, heart-wrenching experience that my family and I have ever had. Eighteen years later I can still see the pain in my parents’ eyes. Perhaps an even greater travesty for this city is that nearly two decades later I continue see that pain in the eyes of other parents who are still losing their children to violence.

On January 17, 2009 seven teenagers were shot outside a party, as a result,

a 16-year old boy died. I saw his grief stricken mother on television with the same look of pain and devastation I had seen in my own mother’s eyes. One disheartening difference between this most recent killing and my brother’s murder is that today no one seems to care.

Eighteen years ago my family stopped watching the news and reading the papers because constantly hearing, reading and seeing stories about my brother’s death was just too difficult. While the coverage was not easy for us at the time, it was an indication that people understood the gravity of a child senselessly losing his life to violence.

In my family’s time of need there was an outpouring of support from businesses, churches and civic groups in our neighborhood, across the city and outside of the city. People wrapped their arms around us and reassured us that in spite of the malevolence that had taken my brother’s life, there are still decent people in the world.

Have we reached a point where we’ve lost our faith in humanity? Do we feel so hopeless and helpless that we’re unable to support others in their greatest time of need?

In the past eighteen years so many teenagers have been lost to violence that we have become desensitized to the full depth of the tragedy. It is not acceptable. It is not acceptable that a 16-year old child was shot and killed for no apparent reason, and it was just a one-day news story. It is not acceptable that our whole community isn’t outraged about the innocence and potential that is lost with every child who dies before his time.

The Solution

Reducing the violence in our community will require a comprehensive set of programs that address several causes and risk factors for violence, and it will require a long-term commitment at every level.

While the police department must play a major role in the solution, they cannot do it all alone. Violence prevention must be addressed in the same way that many other public health issues are addressed.

The campaign to reduce lung cancer does not focus on treatment alone. The campaign has been effective with prevention by educating people on the dangers of smoking and working to change attitudes. The goal is to get those who smoke to

quit and make it unpopular for those who don't smoke to start. Violence prevention has to be approached in the same manner.

School-based initiatives can be very effective for multiple reasons. For starters, there is a captive audience. Teaching students conflict resolution skills to prevent violent outcomes is crucial. Parents can be included to teach, as well as learn these important skills. Schools can also offer safe after-school activities to keep kids off the streets.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 83% of the population claims a religious affiliation. Therefore, the faith-based community can be very effective in getting the message out. Character building can be taught through youth ministries that target at-risk youth. Many churches have the resources to create "street-outreach" programs that go where children are, instead of waiting for the children to come to them.

The police department can help reduce crime and violence by strengthening the gang squad and community policing program. It has been reported that under the Archer administration the gang squad was very effective in reducing violence against youth.

There was a three year period when no one under 16 years old was killed through gun violence. Community policing can offer training for neighborhood watch programs and block clubs to help residents to teach them crime prevention strategies. Increasing police presence by placing mini-stations in schools, recreation centers, and other community organizations can help reduce crime and make the police more accessible to the citizens. It also creates an atmosphere where crime is not tolerated. Last, but not least, gun buy-back programs help by reducing the number of guns on the streets.

Political leaders can assist in all of the above by making violence prevention a public policy priority. They can provide funding and leverage their influence to spread the message through grassroots and media campaigns. Keeping our children safe should not be used as a campaign catchphrase; it must be a major priority for all who have the power to make a difference.

Detroit we have to take a stand. Losing one child to violence is one child too many. It is time for the entire city to come together and send the message that we care about the safety of our

children. We must secure their future and the future of this city by doing everything in our control to stop the senseless violence.

You can reach Saunteel Jenkins by email at Saunteel@SaunteelJenkins.com.