



Street Life: Dealing With Violence and Risk in our Community

INFORM

Fall, 1993

INFORM:

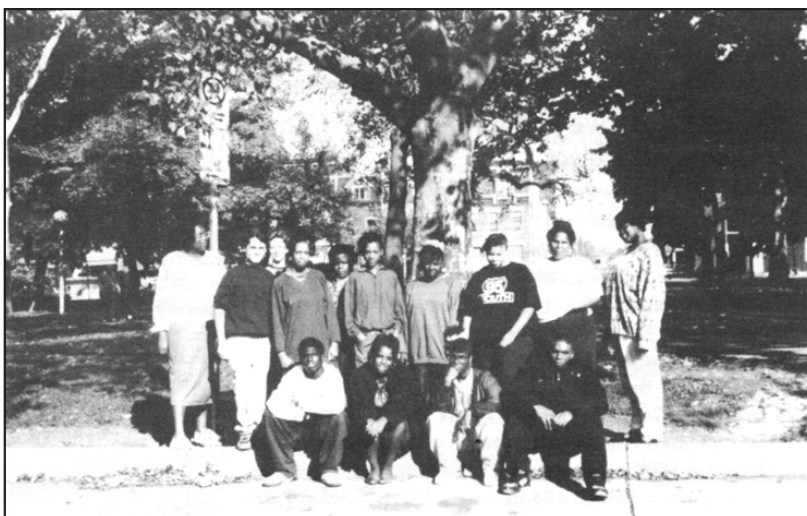
The INFORM project is made up of a group of minds who have come together to share, in writing, the risky situations and tough decisions they have experienced in their everyday lives. Together with parents, teachers, and peers, we hope to decrease the danger in our community and increase understanding of what teenagers must deal with today.

ARGUE:

This fall, we teens and our mentors from Pittsburgh learned more about violence by discussing different causes of violence and solutions. Through our writing, we are trying to get parents, gang members and teachers to stop the violence happening to young people in Pittsburgh.

Informed Arguments About:

Run Brotha Run • Until It Happens to You • Tough Encounter, Bad Experience • The Reasons Kids Are Angry • Innocent Victims: Anger in Teens • Missing! And I Know Where He Is • Gang Violence in Our Neighborhoods



INFORM AND ARGUE writers - Back row, left to right: Felicity Wolfe, Brandon Knebes, Jamie Bell, Dawn Fearbry, Carmella Jones, Sherri Kemp, Marcia Burnett, Christina Mott, Desirae Warren, Brandi Wolfe.
Front row, left to right: Bruce Lindsay, Amber Suber, Tamera Brice, Mark Howard

The Community Literacy Center

A Collaboration of the Community House and the Center
for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon University

Run Brotha Run (You're Damned if You Do, You're Damned if You Don't) by Bruce Lindsey

It was this one particular day in late August, I came out of my house and walked down the street. I saw someone I knew all my life, but he was older than me, and I stopped to talk to him for a minute. All of a sudden, some Crips pulled up. You could tell they were Crips by the blue bandanas –or flags as they are known on the street –or the gang related signs they were throwing up with their hands. I knew most of them from the streets and growing up with them. They looked at us and whispered something. They rode through the alleyway, but they usually ride straight down North Charles St. I knew something was going to happen just by them looking and whispering something. I told the person that I was with what I thought. He said, “Well come on, let’s leave” and I said, “Cool, let’s go.” We went to the apartment where the person I was with lived. The Crips wanted him (more than me), but since I was there I became a victim of circumstances.

They came into his apartment building from the rear and from the front entrance. I honestly thought that I was going to die, ‘cause there was nowhere I could go. The person I was with said, “Come on, we are going to my house to call the police.” Stupidly I followed him. He was unlocking the door to his house when all I heard was, “We gonna kill them niggas.” Then I was sure my life was about to end. I was holding this one door that was the only thing between us and the other people. The other Crips that were there could’ve still gotten us from the rear entrance, especially since we were on the top floor, but I noticed no one was coming from the rear like I had expected. The person I was with was unlocking the top lock on his door still. I guess he got fed up with running and being scared so he pushed me out of the way, kicked the door open that I was holding and saw two Crips standing there. He pointed his gun at them (9mm 18 clip) and said, “What now niggas?” The person I was with was fired up angry, ready to kill. They ran down the steps and told the other Crips, and they got in their cars and left.

The person I was with told me the only reason he didn’t shoot is because the Crips that came in the building were too young to die. The reason no one came from the rear is because the older ones let the young ones come upstairs and almost get killed. I grew up with most of the Crips, but when they got into that gang they had no love for me or anybody else that wasn’t a Crip, which means they couldn’t tell their Crip buddies to stop messing with me if they chose to mess with me.

I should have used better judgment than to go with that person, but I felt I had an obligation to the person I was with, to

be there if something had happened. I didn’t have no obligation to him. I could’ve just kept walking, but I didn’t. I made a decision. But it was a stupid decision. I can’t even go to school without seeing those same boys and them looking at me as if they remember. If I could go back to that day I would’ve just kept walking, because my only obligation is to stay alive. I’m just saying try to always make the decisions so the outcome of it all will do no damage to you. Look out for others too, but also take what you’re going to do in consideration first. The outcome of my situation has affected my life so much that every time I see cars with a lot of people in them I leave the spot where I am at and just go to my house and stay in for awhile.

If I would’ve just turned around and went home, the person I was with could have died. I would not have to worry about going to school and getting killed. If I would’ve left him there and he would’ve lived, he probably would’ve told me that was the right thing for me to do. He didn’t want me mixed up in that ‘cause those were his problems, and they had nothing to do with me. I don’t think it was wise for him to pull out his gun on them. Who knows what the Crips felt like at that particular point. That door just swung open on the Crips and “boom,” there’s a barrel of a gun pointed at them. He spared their lives, but they could have said, “Too bad he spared us,” and just fired on us as soon as we turned our backs. That was if they had a gun at that particular point. Gangs aren’t the way to go because nothing is worth dying over besides family. I’m not in a gang. It would be best if we all could just be cool amongst each other. I know if I was in their shoes I would’ve been trying to get out of the Crips because I figure it like this- I’m too young to die. These fools don’t care about me. They don’t care about themselves. They’re just using me to be bait, but that’s just my opinion. What do I know? Oh! I know one thing, and that’s how to keep myself out of risky situations and to make good decisions.

Teenagers in the city of Pittsburgh today are being placed in a number of risky situations which require difficult decision making. I believe that after reading the situations in this document it is evident that these teens are competent decision makers, often far better than we first choose to give them credit for. Even though teens are capable of avoiding many of the situations presented to them, situations exist that should never have to be encountered. And the only people capable of making these changes are the adults, not the kids who are presently the ones taking the brunt of the blame.

(Mentor) Vincent A. Belfoure

The Friend in Danger

by Carmella Jones

Friend (frend) n.: 1. A person whom one knows, likes, and trusts. 2. A person with whom one is allied in a struggle or a cause.

I have a friend named Mysha and her stepfather used to abuse her. (He beat her with a PIT BULL COLLAR. Now, if you ever seen a pit bull collar, you should know that it looks like a thick work belt -Now, can you imagine being hit with that heavy thing? I don't think so! And they just cut the pit bull collar in half to make it fit the neck of the dog.) Last year she used to come and pick me up on her way to the bus stop for school. It was just starting to get hot outside when I started to notice that she would wear long sleeve shirts when it was going to be 90 degrees that day. (It was to cover up the thick black and blue marks that her dad had inflicted on her.) And that's when I really started to question her. After a while, she finally told me how she got the marks. I started to think to myself, how could someone's own mother sit there and watch her husband beat her own child like that? After she told me what was going on, I offered my help. I told her, "If you want my help I'm here for you, but you have to tell me now." And she said, "Yes."

Right then I started to worry about the complications of getting involved. I started to think that she might not go through with whatever would happen next. I say this because she might be too afraid to go through all the paper work and questioning that might go along with the whole thing. In plain words she might not be able to deal with all the pressure that is involved. She might even go back home and the abuse would get even worse. I was afraid that she would get upset with me because her mother and father would not talk to her as much. Then I started to think about the marks on her arms and legs, and how her mother did not try to stop the abuse, and I was glad to help. At that point I did not care about the consequences because I knew that a friend was in danger and if I didn't help her, no one would.

So now I had to make a couple of good decisions on how I could go about helping her. I wanted to help her right then and there, so I didn't think that an abuse hotline would suffice. The other choice I thought about was to talk to my mother and see what advice she could give me on helping Mysha. I ended up talking to my mother, and she told me to go to school and tell one of the guidance counselors what I had told her. I went to the one who was a friend of my father because I trusted that she would do the right thing for Mysha. I came to find that she knew of the girl in question.

Then she called the child welfare and they pretty much took over. They called her mother's job to inform her that her daughter will not be coming home for a couple of nights because "We have the right to believe that your daughter is in danger when she is at home." Then they called my house and talked to my mother to make sure that she knew what was going on, and to see if it was okay if Mysha could stay the night until we got everything together. After we got off the phone, the nurse had to take pictures of the marks and bruises on Mysha's body, probably to send to the welfare office. The rest is history, but I'll leave you with this - my friend got away from the danger that was in her

home. She does not live with her mother and father any more. Mysha has a baby that is one year old, and they live with a friend and his wife.

The reason I wrote this story is so if someone has a friend that may have been in an abusive situation they will have somewhere to turn. If all this had to happen all over again, then I would do the same thing and help a friend. The moral to this story is this- when a friend is in danger and I can help in some way, then I'm here for them.



Amber Suber and her mentor, Eric Applewhite, find time to flash their pearly whites.

PLACES FOR HELP:

Child Line: 1-800-932-0313
Children and Youth Services: 578-6710
Children and Youth Services: 355-5701
The Whale's Tale: 471-6160

"Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Before I started working with the CLC this was one of my favorite quotes. It still is, but now it means much more to me in a practical sense. I've now seen it applied to real life situations riskier than any I've ever experienced- the kind Carmella's friend faced as well as numerous others you'll soon read. Days from now, as you're going about your everyday business, I hope this document stays in your mind like the refrain of a very unique song. These writers' voices are speaking to you for a reason, and I can only hope you hear.

(Mentor) Laura McClure

Maybe the Reason Why...

by Mark Howard

WHY DON'T YOU...want to go with me to visit your aunt anymore?

WHY DON'T YOU...want to wear your new outfit?..Do you know how much i paid for that?

WHY DON'T YOU...Go to the basketball court anymore? ...All you do is sit around the house all day.

WHY DOESN'T HE...Come over here anymore?.. He used to come from the other side of town just so you two could hang out.

WHY DO YOU...Think you need to change schools all of the sudden? ...What makes you think that you will do any better there?

These are just a few examples of the questions that parents, guardians, and concerned relatives ask their kids because they may not understand the new pressures arising from gangs and other forms of violence. I feel that it is very hard for parents to understand what teenagers are going through these days, simply because they do not see and hear a lot of the things that go on between them. *MAYBE THE REASON WHY...*the person in the first instance may not want to go visit a certain relative is because the relative may live in a neighborhood where this person is unknown or not liked (gang members react to unfamiliar faces almost as badly as to wearing the wrong colors). *MAYBE THE REASON WHY ...*the person in the second instance may not want to wear that certain outfit is because of the color of the outfit. It is a lot easier to get shot over wearing the wrong color in the wrong neighborhood in Pittsburgh now than it ever was. As things progress, it seems as though it will never get better...just worse!!!! *MAYBE THE REASON WHY ...*the person in the third instance does not go to the basketball court anymore is because there could have been a drive-by done by a rivaling gang there before, but it does not necessarily have to be gang related. This person also could have possibly been worried about getting harassed by the police because the basketball court may be considered "HOT." The term "HOT" refers to a certain area that may be known for its heavy drug selling activities. *MAYBE THE REASON WHY...*the person in the fourth instance does not come from the other side of town anymore is because the people in the part of town that he wants to go to may harass him because they do not know him, or they know where he is from. It could also be that the two people just do not get along with each other anymore because their two neighborhoods do not get along. *MAYBE THE REASON WHY ...*the person in the last instance feels that he has to change his school is because something could have happened recently between two neighborhoods that attend that school and it could have caused new problems. Some of the possible problems could be that some of the students are bringing the violence into the school because of something that may have happened on the street. Another reason why someone might want to change schools is because there could be two (or more) different gangs in one school. This could very easily result in constant arguments and fighting between them. The last reason I can think of is, if someone attends a school which is made up of mainly one neighborhood but that person is from a different neighborhood, that person could feel very threatened if the two neighborhoods did not get along. It would be very hard to try to remember what was for homework when you are worried about getting jumped by fifteen or so people after school. Here is one big example of how neighborhood stereotyping limits teenagers

today and puts them in possibly violent situations:

I am now 16 years of age and if I was to go to the Hill, Garfield, East Hills, Homewood, and certain parts of Northside, I would get jumped and possibly shot because they don't know me, or because they know where I'm from and they automatically assume I am in L.A.W.(a Larimer Ave., Wilkensburg gang). I am affiliated with a lot of the people in L.A.W.as friends but I don't participate in hunting down or looking for people in different gangs to beat up or start trouble. I am not even "in" the gang, but I stay over at my friends' houses and go places like the movies or mall with them, but I don't just hang around on the corner with them. My friends sometimes say about me to other people in their neighborhood that "He's in JD" (a member of the JD set) just to protect me, but then other people know me as being in JD and that could, in turn, cause more problems for me. I did not really choose to hang with these people, but it seems as though I am limited to few neighborhoods-Wilkinsburg mostly. Another reason that I hang with these people is because our friendship is stronger than with people in my old neighborhood. For example, we are all too good of friends to let the colors of our clothes get in the way. One time I went to Wilkinsburg and I had on all blue (that is one of the colors that the rivaling gangs wear). None of my friends really said anything about it. They actually joked about it, "What...you a CRIP?"

What are My Choices Here?

CHOICE: Since everybody thinks I'm in it anyway, and they label me that way, I might as well be in the gang. I feel that is why 90% of gang members join. To me, that is peer pressure, though, and it hasn't caused me to join a gang.

CHOICE: Move to the area where your friends are, but watch what you get into. I think this is the best idea, but not everybody can just get up and move. What I mean by "watch what you get into" is: If they want to do drive-bys or beatings of other gang members, I would just stay in the house and play Nintendo. It does help to tell people you disapprove of beating people up for no reason--especially when girls disapprove-- because most girls don't like dudes that bully. It might get the gang members to think twice about it if people from their own neighborhoods say this. One time I talked my friends out of fighting another group.

CHOICE: Don't hang on the corner with known gang members because if someone sees you there, you could be the innocent victim of a drive-by. Go other places. If we see someone from a rivaling neighborhood, I tell my friends not to say anything. Going to parties in our own neighborhood is usually safe.

A Note on Mentoring

by Tim Flower

FLEXIBILITY seems crucial to the kinds of mentoring we've been doing in this CLC project. More traditional mentoring is like apprenticeship or teaching, in which someone who has "mastered" a subject transfers this expertise to an apprentice or student. Such situations are often rigidly structured and authoritarian, hence not very flexible.

But I think what we do, as a cooperative group of teenage writers and older mentors, requires flexibility and rewards it too. I'm especially aware of this now, having been a mentor in several WRITE and INFORM projects, and a sort of roving mentor this time, which helped me see some patterns in what we do. Here are some of the reasons for flexibility:

We're a diverse group made up of three smaller groups with different identities—high school writers, CMU undergraduate mentors, and CLC people. This leads to continual readjustments as we get acquainted and work with each other. The dynamics of collaboration mean that we learn to share a lot but in ever-changing contexts—e.g., everyone together in a big group, in pairs, quartets, ad hoc groups. So who "we" are keeps changing, as do our reasons for being in each group. Even our simplest groups, each writer with his or her mentor, promote flexibility—in getting

to know each other, in trying something new and complex, in juggling various goals and constraints ("Let's see. I've started writing a story, but I have to write *about* it too; and who am I writing it for?") and continually un-learning such things as previous student roles and ideas about teaching. Mentors have to continually "read" what seems to be happening—and not happening—and try to change accordingly. For example, a writer may need help or more support but not ask for it; or a mentor may want to be a friendly supporter, not an editor, critic, guru, secretary, or an authority on grammar, spelling, and punctuation. But what if the writer asks for these kinds of help, or there's disagreement about whether the writing is "finished"? Such problems usually lead to negotiation, which seems inseparable from collaboration.

If you've been reading between the lines, you know why I'm hooked on mentoring in the CLC!

From Reflection by Community Mentors. Tim Flower is an adult mentor from the Community House Church who started working with teens from the Center's beginning.

Until it Happens to You: An Interview with Lorraine Higgins

by Tamera Brice

Tamera: How do you feel now that you learned more about violence from our young kids?

Lorraine: I knew that there was a lot of violence out there, but mostly from the news and newspapers. It's funny how you can know about something like violence by reading about it, but you don't *really* know it until it happens to you or someone you care about. I was surprised that *everybody* in the group, *everybody* had some sad stories to tell. They either witnessed violence or were a victim. Since the start of this project (a little over a month ago), three young men in the Literacy Center that I have worked with have either been involved in a fatal shooting or have had a family member shot. That is really alarming. I think a lot of adults who don't get to speak with teens like you may not really know what is happening. I hope your writing will spread the word.

Tamera: How do you think you can stop verbal abuse from happening?

Lorraine: Why are teens dissing people in the first place? They are really angry and afraid. That came across in the group. Kids

feel like they're living in a war zone, and they put up a tough shield around themselves for protection. Some of the young men recognized that people *try* to get a reputation so kids won't mess with them. Many of the teens pointed out that this reputation thing is also a part of the problem, rather than a solution.

Tamera: What do you think we can do to stop the violence?

Lorraine: The teenagers in the group seemed to put a lot of responsibility on the parents and thought the reason kids join gangs is because they are being mistreated or neglected at home. Maybe young parents need to be helped more in learning how to discipline and raise kids responsibly. Also, I think a lot of people in the project were uncertain about whether they have the right to get involved in other people's business. I think we do have a right when people are being hurt. It's everyone's responsibility.

From Reflection by Community Mentors. Lorraine Higgins, who developed the ARGUE project while finishing her Ph.D. in Rhetoric at CMU, was in her first year as CLC Director.

Mission Possible

by Victor Hogan

If you travel to any major city in this country you will find this scene being played out in every one- young black men hanging out on comers with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Most are facing a life of unemployment and poverty, because they are caught up in a lifestyle that encourages them to be out of the mainstream, where even their language is different. These young men realize they are in a desperate situation, but for various reasons fail to communicate it to anyone. This article was written in an attempt to bridge the communication gap between these young men and older black men. The objective is to encourage the older men to mentor the younger men into a different direction for their lives. I am hoping that by understanding what these young men are saying, the older men will feel more comfortable in their attempt to help.

A pound = Five dollars

In the cut = Place to hang out

1/2 man = Fifty dollars

G = A friend

Get Ghost = To go

Shady = Two faced

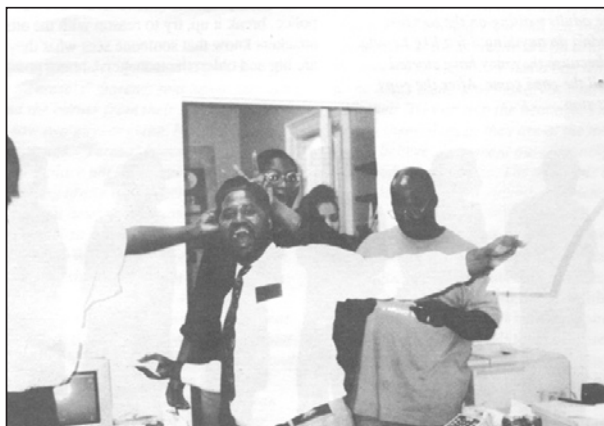
Dub = Twenty dollars

Blunt = Marijuana

Dope = Good

Love Boat = Marijuana

Phat = Good



ARGUE: Just chillin' - Victor Hogan, Felicity Wolfe, Christina Mott, and Don Tucker

Bud = Marijuana

All that = Good

Chronic = Marijuana

It's up there = Good

Busted = Lame

Bomb = Good

Bama = Lame

The words listed above are a first step to help decode some of the language and to understand what is being said. Hopefully this will be a springboard for further participation in these young men's lives. Help them to realize all their possibilities and to complete this "Mission Possible."