

A BRUTALLY HONEST MESSAGE ABOUT VIOLENCE AND GANGS

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PEOPLE WHO have lived with **violence** don't talk **a** lot of stuff **about** it. There's nothing cool **about a** slug, or even **a** fist, ripping up real flesh and bone -- especially if it's yours. Unlike **a** movie character, you don't get up.

Violence as spectator sport is another matter, and that, too, is **as** American **as** apple pie. In one of the world's most violent nations, it's an interesting irony that many people have never gotten into even **a** serious fist fight. And it's usually the guys who haven't stepped into the ring who want to flex -- gangster wannabes like those depicted in Danny Hoch's film, "Whiteboys," trying to keep it real by imitating video **violence** before getting checked by the real world.

You won't get any flex from 45-year-old Sharif Robinson, **a .k. a .** G-Money. During the 1970s, he was **a** hit man for the notorious Young Boys Inc., taking out snitches, gang rivals and others who got in the way of the gang's lucrative heroin operation.

Robinson also trained other gang members how to kill, with guns and with their hands. But there were no second takes in this show, and most of his associates wound up in prison or **a** box -- or both. Robinson's close friend, Raymond (Ray-Ray) Peoples, one of the founders of Young Boys, was shot to death just after his parole from federal prison, **a** month before his 30th birthday.

Robinson, who served more than 20 years in prison for murder, also got **a** taste of what he so coldly served up when someone put **a** hit on him. Caught in cross-fire, he was hit in the head, where bullet fragments remain.

For Robinson, the past is **a** point of pain, not pride. He would wipe it away if he could, even the memories.

"Looking back, it does nothing but sadden me, and if I wasn't trying to get **a** point across to people, I couldn't talk **about** it at all," Robinson said. "I don't want anyone to glamorize what I did or who I was. If you want to glamorize, glamorize what I'm doing now to try to save lives."

Since his release from prison in 1996, Robinson has opened **a** small clothing store and worked in the Handgun Intervention Program started by Judge Willie Lipscomb Jr. When I talked to the judge last year, he said Robinson gave the program street credibility with young offenders. During one session I watched, they listened to Robinson and other speakers before taking **a** tour of the Wayne County morgue. Staring at those mangled bodies laid out on trays, **a** lot of tough faces sobered fast.

Robinson liked the work and the idea of trying to atone for his past by working with the youths of his community. Now he and another ex-con and former gang member, Rodney Green, 36, whom Robinson met in prison 10 years ago, speak to young people at community centers and schools **about** avoiding **violence**, making the right choices, and creating **a** place in the world by working hard, doing right and remaining true to yourself.

Robinson understands the allure of guns. He calls them **a** source of deadly but illusionary power.

"You give **a** person **a** gun, he becomes the toughest man in the world," he said. "You put an 'S' on his chest. But if you're looking for **a** gun to make you **a** man, you're going to be **a** wimp until you die."

With Green, Robinson just formed **a** nonprofit organization called Visionaries Manifest Outreach, an anti- **violence** program targeting youths 7 to 21. People who work with gangs in Detroit say that, after years of decline, gang activity appears to be on the rise again.

Green doesn't blame the media for that, but he says unrealistic portrayals of **violence** make it harder to teach young people the real deal.

"You see Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger shooting up everyone and their momma, but somehow they never get hit," Green said. "There's **a** subliminal **message** in that."

Robinson and Green feel blessed that they have the chance to help, and they wish more people like themselves would do the same. Robinson admires rapper Master P **as** someone who lived **a** thug life but later contributed to his community. But he dismissed some rappers who pimp **a** life they know little **about** just to get paid.

" **A** lot of these guys are studio gangsters," Robinson said. "They haven't experienced nothing."

Experience with **violence** -- especially when you're the one getting served -- is humbling because it reminds you how fragile life is.

Talk to combat veterans who fought in Vietnam or World War II. **As** soldiers, they may have killed many people and watched many others die, but they don't boast **about** how tough they are. Most don't even want to talk **about** it. The memories are too painful. Too real.

Like Robinson and Green, they have known **violence**, not **as a** slick scene, but **as a** deadly force that could shred their skin, break their bones, make their blood gush and turn their bodies numb and cold.

It's nowhere they wanted to go again.

To contact Visionaries Manifest Outreach, call 313-414-0125, or 313-610-1671, anytime.

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Caption: Photo RICHARD LEE/Detroit Free Press

Sharif Robinson, at right, and Rodney Green, next to him, pass out business cards after speaking to River Rouge High School basketball players **aboutviolence** and gangs last week.

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