

MAKING DETROIT SAFER A WAKE-UP CALL GRITTY PROGRAM SHOWS YOUTHS GRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Wednesday, January 19, 2000

Author: JEFF GERRITT FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Judge Willie Lipscomb Jr. talks to a group of youths outside the morgue. Lipscomb helps run the Handgun Intervention Program to steer teens from violent crimes.

Sharif Robinson first heard of Willie Lipscomb Jr. in the 1970s, when Lipscomb was a Wayne County prosecutor locking up Robinson's friends in the notorious Young Boys Inc. gang.

More than 20 years passed before the two came face-to-face. In that time, Lipscomb became a 36th District Court judge. Robinson, an ex-con known on the street as G-Money, continued his career as a hit man and drug dealer, before spending another 15 years in prison for murder.

But today, the two men stand on the same side of the law, helping run the Handgun Intervention Program that Lipscomb founded in 1993 to steer young offenders from guns and violence.

Every Saturday morning, about 25 young men and women come to 36th District Court to listen to Lipscomb, Robinson and other volunteers and take a trip to the morgue.

On a recent Saturday, Lipscomb, 56, stood before them in an elegant dark suit. Robinson, 44, wore a silver and black silk shirt and exotic leather shoes. Lipscomb challenged the youths to reconnect with their culture. Robinson pointed out the mines of street life.

The ex-prosecutor and ex-con know they need each other to make the program work.

"You can't do this without people like Sharif," Lipscomb said. "Even though I come from a poor family, no matter what I, or some of the other volunteers say, we're going to be viewed as suspect -- as middle-class people who are part of the system.

"Sharif has instant credibility. Some of these young people may not have heard of Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael ...But they've heard of G-Money."

Lipscomb was concerned about handgun violence. The 1993 shooting death of a teenager he was close to in his east-side neighborhood pushed him to action.

He recalled a program he took part in while in the Air Force that used graphic photos of traffic fatalities to get enlisted men to drive more safely. It seemed to work, so Lipscomb included in his program graphic photographs of gun fatalities along with trips to the morgue.

The Handgun Intervention Program gets referrals from adult and juvenile court. Many people go as a condition of their bond.

Volunteers who work with the program include probation officer Denise Hall, Wayne County Sheriff's Deputy John Jones, University of **Detroit** student Tyrone Rainer and **Detroit** high school student Maya Cadwell.

In 1997, Robinson was charged with reckless use of **a** firearm after being released from prison in 1996. He was ordered to attend the Handgun Intervention Program and was impressed enough to join **as a** speaker.

"I saw that they were doing something positive, and I didn't look at them **as a** bunch of phony individuals," Robinson said. "They were caring people who showed genuine love.

"Being an ex-con, I try to make you aware that, if you continue doing what you're doing, you're going to destroy your future or end up in someone's graveyard.

" **A** gun is illusionary power. You give **a** person **a** gun, he becomes the toughest man in the world; you put an 'S' on his chest. But I've seen brothers in prison become soft when you take that gun away from them.

"If you're looking for **a** gun to make you **a** man, you're going to be **a** wimp until you die."

To see the face of death, young people are taken to the Wayne County morgue, where recently about **a** dozen bodies lay on trays, their skulls cut and faces peeled, **as** autopsy assistants removed brains and organs.

The youths are no strangers to violence. Asked how many knew someone who was shot to death, nearly every hand went up. Still, staring at the mangled flesh, the tough postures wilted. One queasy young man asked to sit down.

As the technicians continued their work, Lipscomb talked about the consequences of violence, the loss of culture and community, the beauty of each individual, the loss of power and the importance of education and **making** money legally doing something you enjoy.

All participants get **a** packet that includes U.S. handgun statistics and **a** Vanity Fair article on slain rapper Tupac Shakur.

A 1997 study funded by the U.S. Justice Department found that attitudes toward handguns changed dramatically for those attending the **Detroit** program.

Terence Hawkins, 21, of **Detroit** was ordered to attend after he was caught with **a** Tech-9 in his car. Hawkins said he would not carry another gun.

"I'm **a** changed man," Hawkins said while leaving the morgue. "This was graphic -- real graphic. It was eye-opening. I don't want to be involved with any violent act."

Armeashia Cummings, 16, Vaughn Mittchell, 15, and Cecelia Sharpe, 16, of **Detroit** , entered the program last year on concealed weapons charges. All three said the program changed their attitudes. They now work **as** volunteers for the program every Saturday.

Like many young people in the program, the three said they were carrying weapons for protection. They said they now know the weapons only increased the danger and kept them from thinking of other ways to handle their problems.

"When I went into the program, I had an attitude," Cummings said. "But when I started to listen, it was real. Then we went down to the morgue. It was **a wake-up call** ."

JEFF GERRITT can be reached at 313-223-4461. {MARGINALIA} !-#include virtual="/index/fl_locway.fhtml"-->

{KEYWORDS} JUVENILE; CRIME; PREVENTION; PROGRAM; UNUSUAL; HANDGUN INTERVENTION PROGRAM

Caption: Photo WILLIAM ARCHIE/ Detroit Free Press

Timothy Justice, 16, listens to an investigator last week at the Wayne County Morgue **as** part of the Handgun Intervention Program.

Judge Willie Lipscomb Jr. talks to **a** group of youths outside the morgue. Lipscomb helps run the Handgun Intervention Program to steer teens from violent crimes.

Sharif Robinson

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1B

Record Number: 0001190109

Copyright (c) 2000 Detroit Free Press