

Personal profile

Success story: From inmate to role model

For years, when Xavier Williams dreamed of attending the University of Chicago, he had no reason to think it would be anything but a dream. He was, after all, serving a 35-year prison sentence for a gang-related murder he was convicted of when he was 15.

But Williams never gave up on that dream. After serving 20 years of his sentence, he was released from prison a little over a year ago, and this fall he is scheduled to begin classes for his master's degree at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration.

Williams is an outreach worker with CeaseFire, bringing his experience and knowledge to help redirect the lives of gang members and other high-risk youths in Chicago's southwest side, an area that includes the neighborhoods of Gage Park, West Elsdon, Chicago Lawn, and West Lawn. He helps provide these young people with alternatives to the type of lifestyle that robbed him of his youth.

For someone who spent more than half his life in prison, working with young men to keep them out of the same system can be a tough assignment. Interaction with the legal establishment in support of clients is difficult for Williams. “The most awkward part is when I have to go to court with clients,” he said. “I never thought I would be in that environment again.”

Still, Williams uses his experience to deliver a strong message to the young men he

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*CeaseFire Week
2004*



U.S. Senator Richard Durbin joins other elected officials to lead the Logan Square Peace Walk on June 5 to kick off CeaseFire Week. More photos from CeaseFire Week on page 2.

Community focus

Making a difference in Logan Square

At the end of May 2003 there had been eight shootings in police beat 1413 in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. By the end of the year the beat had racked up 18 shootings and 10 homicides, the highest number of killings in any beat in the city.

So far this year there has been only one shooting in 1413, where CeaseFire outreach workers have been active for about a year and a half. So, when the neighborhood hosted its 9th Annual Peace Walk to mark the beginning of CeaseFire Week on June 5, the residents really had something to celebrate.

“This is what we want, we want peace in the neighborhood,” said David Rosario, one of the organizers of the first Logan Square Peace Walk nine years ago. That walk was in response to the fatal shooting of a young man — a guy Rosario had been trying to help get away from gang violence — in front of the Boys and Girls Club of Logan Square.

Rosario, who works for the Alliance of Logan Square Organizations (ALSO), one of CeaseFire's community partners, was a social worker with the Boys and Girls Club at the time of the shooting. The man was like most gang members Rosario knows: they want to get away from the violence but they don't know how.

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reaches out to. What his work boils down to, he said, is about keeping the guys he works with from getting killed or ending up in jail. When he refers a client to a job and it works out, his work is particularly rewarding. Like the time not long ago when he helped a couple of guys he knew from prison. "They were struggling," he said, and it made him feel good that he was able to help them get jobs.



Williams

Williams' motivation to go into social work was instinctive, but also practical. He knew there weren't going to be many other professions that would welcome his kind of experience. "I felt like this was my calling," he said.

He doesn't dwell on the past and what he lost by being in prison for so long. Instead he focuses on what he learned and what he can pass on to others. "They got my youth, OK, I'll leave with some degrees and some life experience," he said of his prison stint.

While in prison he earned his associate's degree and bachelor's degree from Roosevelt University. But turning his life around and making something positive out of it didn't come easily or automatically. Initially, looking at a 35-year sentence, he had a defeatist attitude, he said. But as time passed, and he saw family members growing up and life passing him by, he realized he wanted to change things. He set his sights on getting his education and eventually going into social work.

Williams left prison in March 2003 and came to Chicago. He didn't know anyone. The only contact he had in the city came from a buddy in prison who gave him the name of a person with ties to an anti-violence organization he had never heard of before: CeaseFire. Things began to look up as soon as he made contact with the group.

"I'm scared to death. I don't know what to do, but I want to do right," he recalled feeling during those early days alone in Chicago. "And CeaseFire called me for an interview. I didn't expect to get the job. I was prepared for disappointment. But I was willing to keep trying."

But he did get the job, and he began working with CeaseFire in June 2003. "This was the first job interview I went on in my life," Williams said. "And I landed!"

The anxiety and fear of the unknown that had troubled him began to fade. As he settled into his new life and the outreach work, his confidence grew. "I can do this," he recalled thinking.

And he was finding he could do well in academics as well. He began graduate studies at Roosevelt University and surprised himself by getting two "As." He thought, "Damn, I guess I *can* do this."

Shortly after joining CeaseFire, Williams went to the University of Chicago to talk to students about gangs and prison. "Who knows better about that?" he asked. Not long after that he was encouraged to apply to U. of C. by some key people he confided in about his long-held dream of attending the prestigious school. The director of a social service agency on the South Side introduced him to a U. of C. professor who helped him with the application process, and last March Williams heard that he had been accepted.

Now his chief concern is securing the funds to pay for the school, but he is determined to make that happen, and even more determined to finish the program and get his master's degree. "I want to complete it now. I intend to complete it. Getting in is not enough," he said. ■

CeaseFire Week 2004

More than 60 events were held in 12 neighborhoods June 5-12



Mayor Richard Daley at Belmont-Cragin



Logan Square



Garfield Park

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Rosario is a supervisor of CeaseFire outreach workers. The nine outreach workers cover two primary police beats, 1413 and 2525, carrying caseloads of about 20 clients each. The workers attempt to reach out to gang members and other high-risk youths to give them alternatives to the violence.

Reacting to shootings to prevent retaliation is part of the job, but the outreach workers also do a lot of preemptive work to keep shootings from happening at all. Much of their time is spent building relationships and talking to gang members to head off violence before it occurs.

“We don’t wait for something to happen, we’re out there monitoring,” Rosario said. “It’s really hard to build a relationship after a shooting. They build relationships to prevent violence,” he said of the outreach workers.

“And when there is a shooting this is one of the best responding teams I’ve seen. And I’ve been around,” Rosario said.

The annual Peace Walk in Logan Square has been a major event for CeaseFire week for the past three years. It was about a year and a half ago that U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin secured federal funding that allowed CeaseFire to expand with outreach workers in Logan Square. This year the senator led the Peace Walk through the neighborhood.



Logan Square Violence Prevention Coordinator Maggie Pagan (middle) with outreach workers (clockwise from top left) Efrain Torres, Melinda Duran, Alex Olivera, Luis Maldonado, Xavier McElrath-Bey, and Jose Nieves.

Shootings are down in beat 1413 and the other beat in Logan Square where CeaseFire outreach workers are active, beat 2525. There have been only two shootings this year in that beat, compared to six at this time a year ago and 20 for all of last year, according to preliminary data from the Chicago Police Department.

“I do think CeaseFire has contributed to that reduction, along with police and CAPS (the city’s community policing initiative),” said Maggie Pagan, violence prevention coordinator with ALSO.

The key to the outreach workers’ success in reaching clients is their understanding of the area and the people, said Rosario. “You have to have street knowledge. You have to have that relationship,” he said.

And sometimes, it’s a matter of being in the right place at the right time. There have been incidents when outreach workers have come across gang members preparing to retaliate over an incident and the workers have managed to cool the antagonists down and prevent a retaliatory shooting. They view it as saving two lives, that of the potential victim and that of the person who might have gone to prison.

“A lot of time these guys want to stop, but they don’t know how,” said outreach worker Alex Olivera. It becomes the challenge of the outreach workers to help them find ways to stop.

“Not only are we addressing the problem, but we’re trying to tell them the solution to their issues,” said outreach worker Jose Nieves. ■

About CeaseFire

CeaseFire, an initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention, uses outreach workers, clergy, and other community leaders to intervene and prevent violence in specific neighborhoods.

CeaseFire outreach workers are active in Southwest Chicago, West Humboldt Park, Auburn Gresham, Logan Square, Rogers Park, and Maywood. CeaseFire is in development in Rockford, East St. Louis, Aurora, and the Chicago neighborhoods of Belmont-Cragin, Brighton Park, East Garfield Park, Englewood, and Roseland.

The major components of CeaseFire are:

- Development of a community coalition consisting of residents, clergy, schools, law enforcement, and community-based organizations.
- Outreach workers involved with the most at-risk individuals to connect them with services and opportunities.
- Swift, organized responses to any shooting that occurs in a declared CeaseFire zone.
- Public education to drive home the message that violence is never acceptable and that there are alternatives

The Chicago Project for Violence Prevention is sponsored by the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health, and has offices on the school’s campus.

Join us! To find out what you can do to help stop the shooting, call the toll-free CeaseFire hotline at **1-866-TO-CEASE**, or visit our website at: www.ceasefirechicago.org

Shootings in CeaseFire Zones

Preliminary data from the Chicago Police Department’s Information Collection for Automated Mapping (ICAM) Database

Community (Police beats)	Jan-May 2003	Jan-May 2004	Percent change
W. Humboldt Park and W. Garfield Park (1111, 1112, 1114, 1115)	21	10	-52%
Logan Square (1413, 2525)	14	3	-79%
Southwest (823, 825)	11	7	-36%
Auburn Gresham (611, 612)	6	7	--
Maywood	29	17	-41%
Total	81	44	-46%

Leadership perspective

Board member Marjorie Craig Benton takes on another challenge

Marjorie Craig Benton likes challenges, and as the founding member of the Advisory Board of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention she has taken on a big one: getting more corporate sponsorship.

“We need to raise more money,” she said recently. The numbers are showing that the project is working, and that information needs to be parlayed into an investment from the corporate community to help make neighborhoods safer, she said. “Without safe neighborhoods nothing else matters.”

As a co-founder of the Chicago Foundation for Women, the Peace Museum in Chicago, and the Women’s Issues Network, Benton is used to taking on challenges and making things happen. She is one of Chicago’s most prominent civic leaders and philanthropists, working tirelessly on local and international issues, and the Chicago Project was a very good fit for her interests and concerns.

“I’ve been involved almost from the very start,” Benton said. She met Executive Director Gary Slutkin at a dinner party hosted by a mutual friend, and they quick-

ly discovered they had a lot in common. He was returning to Chicago after working as an epidemiologist with the World Health Organization in Africa. She was a former U.S. Ambassador to UNICEF. They both had worked in Somalia. “We had a lot to talk about, a lot in common,” Benton recalled.



Benton

“Without safe neighborhoods nothing else matters.”

And they both saw violence as a public health issue. So it wasn’t hard in 1996 for Slutkin to convince Benton to take on one more cause and join the Advisory Board of his new project.

“I’m a sucker for issues that I care about,” she said.

She also likes how the project addresses the issue of violence. “I like the mission, second I like the approach to the issue: on the ground, grassroots, empowering people.”

In addition to the mission and the methodology, the third thing that has impressed her about the project is the people in-

involved. “That’s a powerful combination when those three come together,” she said.

Her commitment and tireless work on issues that she cares about was recently recognized by the Council on Foundations, which awarded her and her husband, Charles, the Distinguished Grantmaker

Award for 2004. The award recognizes lifetime achievement in philanthropy. Charles Benton is board chair of the Benton Foundation and Marjorie Craig Benton is a trustee.

In addition to her work with UNICEF, her international experience includes serving as a delegate to the United Nations special sessions on disarmament in the 1970s and board chair of Save the Children on issues related to women, children and development. ■



CeaseFire

An initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention

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