

Ronnie's Good Deed

The homicide rate in Baltimore City is down from a year ago. That's good news, indeed for people who live and work in our city. But, try convincing Baltimore resident Patricia Grant to find joy in this statistic. Ms. Grant is the mother of 14-year-old Ronald "Ronnie" Jackson, who was shot and killed Sunday, December 7 as he crossed the street in front of his West Baltimore home while delivering two grapefruits to an elderly neighbor. According to reports, Ronnie's murderer apparently mistook him for someone else.

Certainly we should be pleased that the murder rate is dropping, but how can we as a community find any satisfaction in this progress when Ronnie Jackson became the fifth 14-year-old murdered in Baltimore this year and the 25th teenager.

The cynical among us might say, thinking Ronnie's death and many of the other 25, the price to be paid for bad choices, "He was probably mixed up with drugs ... a member of a gang ... running with the wrong crowd." That may be the case with some, but not with Ronnie, who was an 8th grade middle school student who excelled in school, played cymbals in the band and basketball at the Police Athletic League. He was a little boy who was trying to do a good deed and was in the wrong place at the wrong time - even though that place was just steps from his own front door.

His death reads like a scene straight out of the late Baltimore-based television drama, "The Wire." If it were still on the air, this sobering and all-too-common reality would likely have served as creative inspiration for the show's writers and producers - former Baltimore cops and cop reporters themselves. The show was both lauded and criticized for depicting the city and its ails in the rawest possible light. From what I saw of and read about the show, I noticed that absent from the depiction of the government and community effort to save the city, were Baltimore's historic churches.

At-risk kids like Ronnie, who weren't involved in drugs or in trouble with the law, kids who are trying to do the right thing by staying in school and out of trouble, are the very kids we as a society and as communities of faith have to protect. Children

like Ronnie Jackson are the reason why our city parishes scrape together volunteers and pennies, even when there are other needs to meet and other prayers to make.

Representatives from every city parish met this past May at St. Mary's Seminary for a day-long peace-keeping conference. The group strategized about current and future efforts for promoting peace in city neighborhoods. As an outgrowth of that conference, a group of 10 city pastors have been meeting monthly with Bishop Denis Madden, vicar bishop for the city (as well as Baltimore and Harford Counties), to advance the ideas that were developed in May. They have been carving out of their already-over-burdened schedules a few hours each month to develop substantive roles for our parishes to play in the city-wide effort to reduce crime and build peace in our city's neighborhoods.

When the City of Boston created headlines in the late 1990s because of its historic reduction in crime, the Police Commissioner of Boston cited the role of churches. "If there is one word that I would use to describe what is happening, it would be 'collaboration,' " Commissioner Paul Evans said in a New York Times article. "Boston's success was the result of an intense collective effort by the police department, religious leaders, local community groups and private citizens."

One such collaborative effort proposed by our pastors here in Baltimore is modeled after a successful mediation-based pilot program in Chicago. Safe Streets - a partnership between the Church and the City Health Department - is aimed at reducing shootings and homicides within targeted communities in Baltimore City where homicide is one of the greatest risk factors for teenagers and young adults. The program employs individuals, many of whom are former criminals themselves, who have credibility on the streets and can effectively intervene in conflicts or potential conflicts and promote alternatives to violence.

Safe Streets is currently operating in several city neighborhoods, including those served by St. Veronica's and St. Wenceslaus. Ms. Cathy McClain, Youth Minister at St. Veronica, has operated the Cherry Hill Safe Streets initiative since it began this past September, and says this level of intervention is effective because "It's taking people from the streets and putting them back in the streets with a different message. They go out between the hours of 4 p.m.-midnight and 6 p.m.-2 a.m.,

targeting young people between ages 14-25 who are at high risk of being a victim of a gun crime, known to carry a weapon, or a victim of a shooting. They help them to resolve a conflict in any other way than with a gun.” Ms. McClain reports that before the program started there were 11 shootings in Cherry Hill and only one since. “And that one would have likely escalated but the outreach workers knew the victim and went to the hospital to counsel the victim against retaliating.”

The grant for this effort expires in April and without additional sources of revenue, the program will be unable to continue, and these once-safe streets will then likely be relinquished to those who terrorized them before. We are working on other such sources of funds and hope not only to keep the program at St. Veronica’s alive, but to expand it to other troubled neighborhoods anchored by a Catholic parish. It is my hope to meet with Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon and Baltimore Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld next month to discuss how all of our city parishes can become involved in supporting Safe Streets.

The pastors are also looking at other efforts that will protect at-risk youth and promote peace. Such efforts include mentoring programs – including those aimed at children of incarcerated parents, pastoral outreach to families and victims of violence, and the promotion of peace through prayer vigils, organized events, and the establishment of a “Covenant for Peace.”

Though these programs differ in focus and in scope, they collectively represent a common refrain of the people they seek to serve: “These are our children, these are our streets. We must stop the shootings and stop the killings!” They also give voice to the long-held belief of this city-based Archdiocese, as articulated in 1966 by Cardinal Shehan: “If we don’t save the city, we can forget about the Church in the Archdiocese.”

My personal gratitude I extend to the many women and men of our Archdiocese so committed to returning the tough streets of our city back to the good people of Baltimore. I am especially grateful to the good and zealous priests of our city who, serving in the example of the recently deceased and longtime pastor of St. Peter Claver, Father “Rocky” Kearns, lead by their indefatigable faith and steadfast commitment to the communities they serve. Let us pray to Almighty God that their

resolve be strengthened by the support of their brother priests, the dedicated religious we are blessed to serve alongside, and by the senseless and tragic deaths of children like Ronnie Jackson.