



AN HONEST DIALOGUE ABOUT STRATEGIES TO PREVENT YOUTH VIOLENCE

resources for
YOUTH

2 Voices

from people committed
to preventing youth
violence.

The SacraMentor Program

of Sacramento

Judge Alice Lytle, a Sacramento County juvenile court judge, grew weary of the attention paid to youth violence prevention which amounted to little more than a lot of talk and even more blue-ribbon commissions. "The most pressing problem we have in this state—indeed, in this country—is our failure to commit to the needs of children," Judge Lytle says. "We can talk about family values all we want, and set up more committees, but I felt that with that approach we'd forever be picking around the edges of the problem." So, in 1993, with the help of a \$50,000 leadership award from The California Wellness Foundation, Judge Lytle created SacraMentor, a program that partners juvenile offenders with volunteer mentors from the Sacramento community.

The first person that a juvenile offender entering the program meets is Lanell Herne, 25, mentor coordinator. "They're always shocked when they first see me because I guess they're expecting someone older who's going to start off with a lecture," says Lanell, laughing. "But I always start by telling them my story. I'm an ex-gang member. I'm an

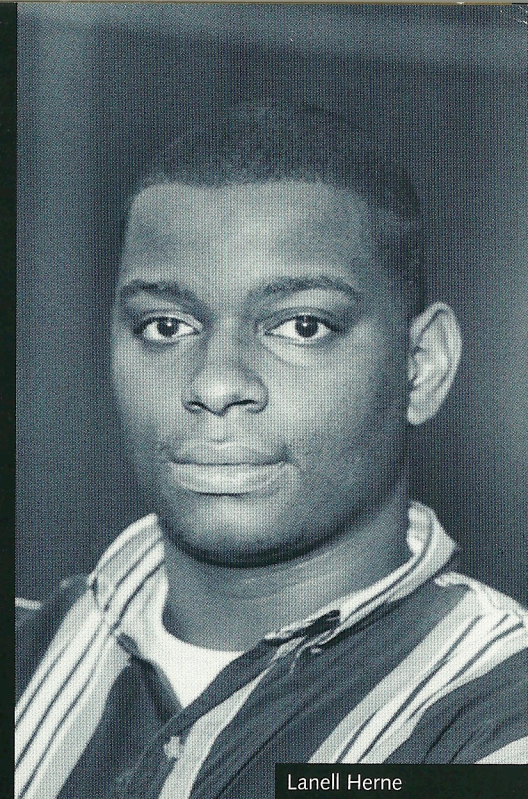
ex-drug dealer. I've been shot at. The whole nine yards."

Fed up with the lack of direction in his life and shaken by a shooting that almost left him dead, Lanell several years ago signed up for a couple of courses at a local community college. There he learned about the SacraMentor program. "The person who really helped me turn around was Judge Lytle," Lanell says. "I was motivated enough to start taking courses, but it was her faith in me and her respect for my abilities that's gotten me to where I am."

"I think it really helps that I'm young," Lanell says of his current work. "The young people who come in, I talk their talk. So when I tell them college is possible, that they can change their life, they know what the deal is." "I tell them from the start: you have a choice. You can take the opportunity we offer, or you can ignore it. But then a year or two down the road, when you end up in the CYA (California Youth Authority) or wherever, don't say you didn't have a chance", Lanell says. So far, the SacraMentor project has matched dozens of youthful offenders with volunteer mentors.



Hon. Alice A. Lytle



Lanell Herne

"People can't look to judges, social workers and police officers and expect us to take care of youth violence prevention on our own," Judge Lytle says. "We don't have the resources to do all that we know should be done. It really comes down to a community effort. Unless we can engage a much wider group of people, we'll never be able to advance violence prevention to the extent those of us on the front lines know we must."

The West Oakland Violence Prevention Project

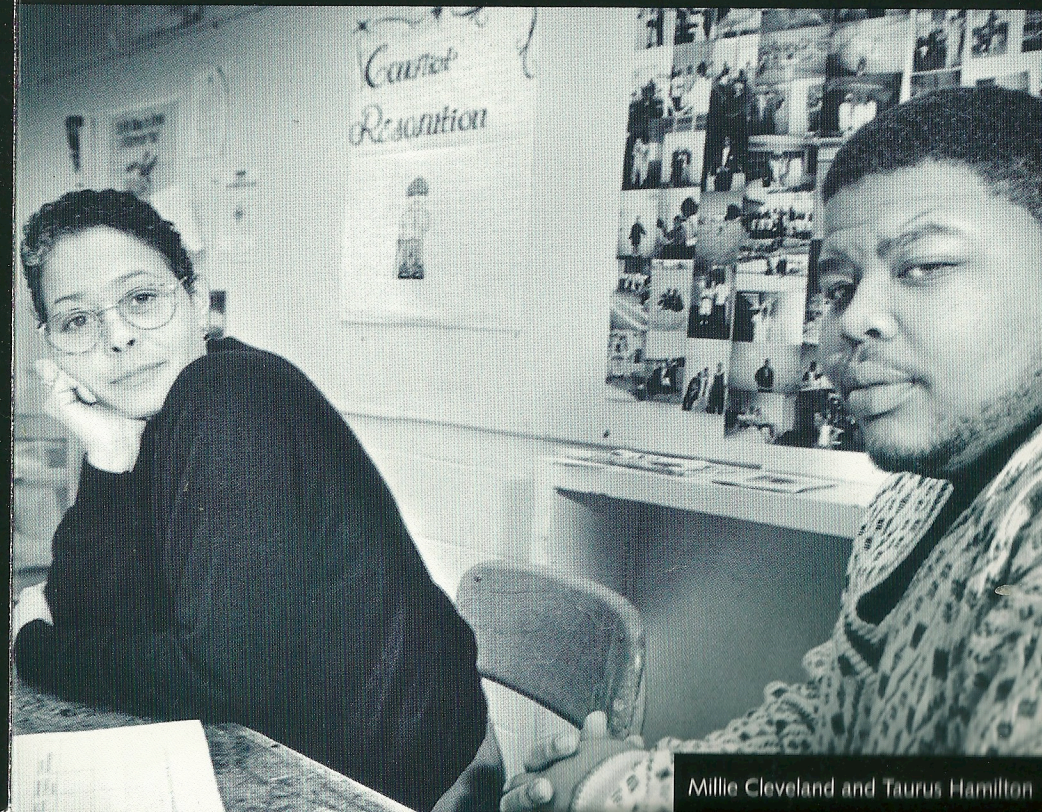
For years, Taurus Hamilton sold drugs in the West Oakland neighborhood that's been his home since birth. Today, Taurus runs a school-based violence prevention project in the same neighborhood. What caused his dramatic turnaround? Taurus became involved with the West Oakland Violence Prevention Project, a highly-regarded conflict resolution program teaching young people critical problem-solving skills and helping them avoid violence. "It's like the people there believed in me before I learned to believe in myself," Taurus says.

The West Oakland Violence Prevention Project, under the auspices of Program Director Millie Cleveland, has operated school-based conflict resolution programs in many of Oakland's most violent neighborhoods since the mid-1980s. Each year, project staff teaches volunteer students to serve as mediators who in turn (with the help of a project staff person) help resolve peer conflicts that arise at the school. "Some of our referrals are through a teacher or administrator, but the bulk are student referrals," Cleveland says. "The students themselves come in asking for help with some conflict they're

having. That's what kind of respect our mediators have earned." Millie figures she's helped train hundreds of peer mediators over the years who have helped thousands of disputants hammer out their problems without resorting to violence. Taurus Hamilton was among those recruited to one of the project's three-day intensive training sessions. "When I heard the words, 'conflict resolution', I said sign me up," Taurus says. "I've seen people shot over the smallest things. I've seen people killed in front of my eyes. So even though I had no idea what this project was about, I knew there was this great need for better conflict resolution skills in my community."

Today, Taurus works as the project's site manager at a West Oakland middle school, where he helps train the next generation of peer mediators. "It was my training and my participation as a mediator that made me realize that I had to get rid of the negatives in my life," Taurus says. "I mean, how could I be helping kids get their own life in order when later in the day, I'd be out there selling dope? What type of image would that project?"

"The real value of this program goes well beyond solving conflicts," Millie says. "Kids participating in the program, whether as mediator or disputant, learn to better understand themselves and each other. They're learning communication skills and problem-solving skills that will allow them to better handle problems in their own life. They start thinking about the consequences of actions, which gets them to think about the future."



Millie Cleveland and Taurus Hamilton

Proyecto Pastoral at Dolores Mission

of Los Angeles

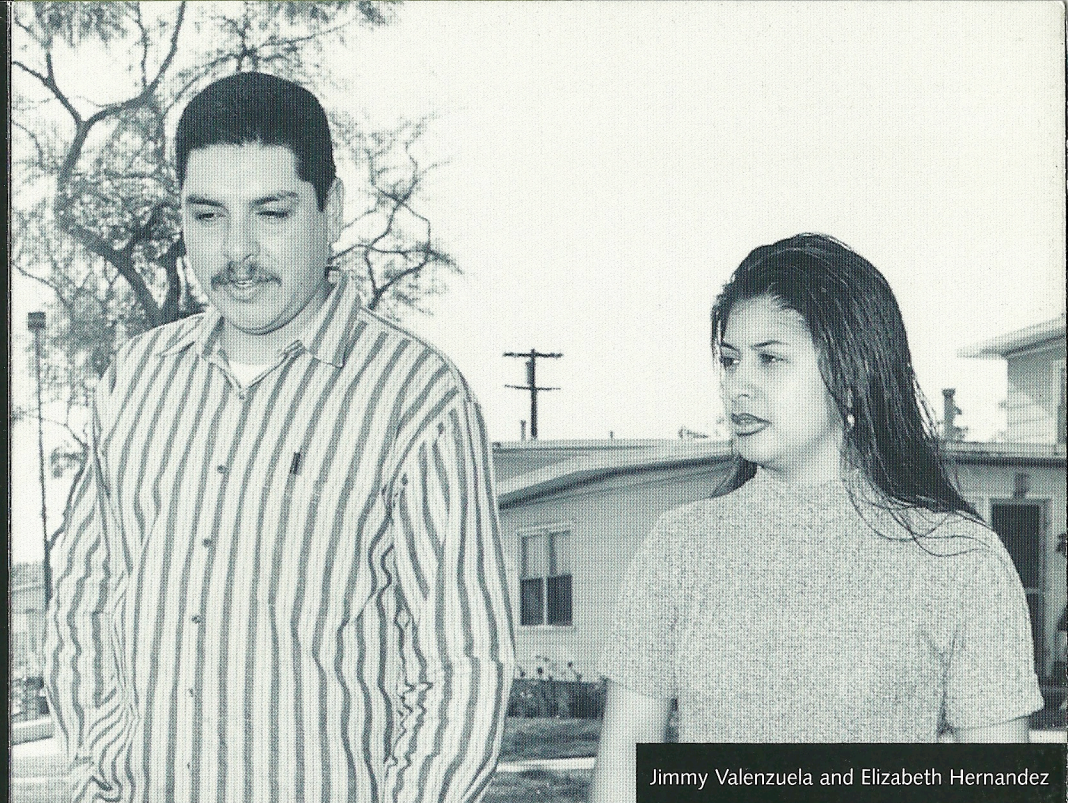
"I recruit kids in the only way I know how," says Jimmy Valenzuela, who since 1993 has coordinated Proyecto Pastoral's Violence Prevention Program in East Los Angeles. "Born and raised in East L.A. myself, I go to the streets where young people hang out and talk with them. By talking with them, I try and get them thinking about their future—to get thinking about a life beyond their corner. We sponsor softball tournaments, so I'll try and get them in one of those. Or I'll get them to join us for an outing to the mountains, or the beach, or wherever. We do all this, because it's important that young people from these communities see that there's this whole wide world out there."

Elizabeth Hernandez was 16 years old, a high school dropout involved in her neighborhood gang, when she met Jimmy. "I don't know where I would be if it wasn't for Jimmy and Proyecto," Elizabeth says. "I wasn't in trouble with the police or anything like that, but I wasn't really headed anywhere. I had quit school in the 10th grade and was basically just hanging out on the corner. I

used to see Jimmy around the neighborhood all the time, and we'd talk. I could tell he really cared about us." Eventually, he convinced Elizabeth to attend the ten-week Chicano history course he teaches at Proyecto. It was that experience, she says, that prodded her to go back to school.

"Jimmy started talking to me about college," Elizabeth says. "The truth is I didn't believe it could happen because I didn't think someone like me from the projects would ever be accepted into college. But Jimmy really stuck with me." Today, Elizabeth is a freshman at Cal State Los Angeles and plans for a career as a probation officer. "I want to help the young people in my community," she says. "I want to see if I can help them the way the people at Proyecto helped me."

Adriana Jimenez, 25, is another Proyecto Pastoral success story. Once, Adriana sold drugs and carried a gun; today she coordinates Proyecto's mentoring program. "My former homies, they look at me like I'm a whole different person," Adriana says.



Jimmy Valenzuela and Elizabeth Hernandez

"You can say I used to be real bad." What's frustrating to me is all the funding problems we're having," Adriana continues. "What am I supposed to tell my girls? I want to tell them about all the things we have planned for the next eight weeks, how we'll match them up with mentors and have all these programs going, but what if the funding doesn't go through? The last thing I want to do is build up their hopes and then have them walk away feeling like I'm just another person who lied to them."

La Familia Counseling Center

of Sacramento

When Adina Medina first met Anita Barnes, executive director of La Familia, Adina was a high school dropout whose future looked grim. "I wasn't really up to much of anything beyond drinking, smoking weed and hanging around with friends all day," Adina admits.

"But Anita, she took a real interest in me. She encouraged me to get my GED. She was always there for me, giving me books to read or just there with encouraging words. She made me feel like I was smart, that I really could accomplish things if I really put my mind to it. Up until then, no one had ever said to me, "You have a lot to offer and I'm going to give you the opportunity to prove you can do better with your life."

La Familia is a Sacramento-based program that offers a broad array of activities, ranging from counseling to computer training to tutoring services. Adina, hoping to earn some spending money, was drawn to La Familia through the group's annual summer jobs program. She was sixteen at the time. "Adina started working as a volunteer even after her job was over," Anita says. "The more

I got to know her, the more potential I saw. She demonstrated a lot of leadership qualities. I knew that if those qualities could be polished and brought out, she could be a terrific role model for the younger kids we needed to reach."

That faith has certainly paid off—for both the mentor and her young disciple. Among her other activities at La Familia, Adina meets regularly with teens at two Sacramento high schools. "I wouldn't go as far as saying I'm turning around the lives of the kids I'm meeting with, but compared to when they first came in, I'd say a bunch at both schools have made a big turnaround," Adina says. "These are kids who first came in wearing deep blue or deep red outfits. Now they are confiding in me that the gang wants them to jump someone and they don't want to do it. They're turning to me for advice about how they might handle it. So far, at least five kids, I can think of, have left gangs and are now coming to our late night program." This spring, Adina will start taking classes at Sacramento City College.

"Peer mentoring is a critical component of much of what we do," Anita Barnes says. "For us, it means a lot that we have people able to talk their language. It's important that the kids are able to talk with peers close to their age who've gone through the same struggles. I've seen kids turn to Adina as someone with experience, whose views they respect. It's people like Adina who are able to break through barriers that we, as concerned adults, often can't."



Adina Medina and Anita Barnes

The Resources for Youth campaign begins with the assumption that youth violence is a problem that affects all of us. While ensuring public safety is a priority, we believe much more can be done to prevent youth violence and crime. Discussion of solutions is often difficult because this issue has become both polarized and politicized. One thing we can all agree on is the need for an honest dialogue. The campaign will provide California policy makers and community leaders with **facts, perspectives, voices and strategies** to prevent youth violence and crime so that together we can become resources for our youth.

We hope you will listen to these voices and invite you to share your thoughts with us.

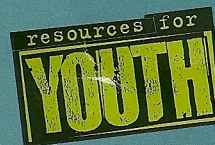
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