

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Gun Violence, Gangs, and Community Intervention

When you're a Black teenager from the South Bronx, Brownsville, or Bedford, you're at least twice as likely to be involved in a shooting as your peers in wealthier neighborhoods; home is not a welcoming place to return to after school but more likely a tiny two-room apartment in a public housing complex plagued by leaks, mold, and pests. You share it with more siblings than your parents can afford to feed, assuming your parents are even there and you don't have to witness episodes of domestic violence. You grow up fast and stop dreaming the moment you understand you'll have to save yourself, and to survive you adapt.

You end up joining a gang not only because you need protection but because you want to belong to something. You're only sixteen when you start dealing; you build a decent circuit and people in the neighborhood respect you. Money comes in easily, so you can help your mother pay the bills, and your little sister can go to school with a new pair of shoes. You're the man of the house, and the responsibility is yours.

It sounds like the plot of *Juice*, the 1992 film starring 2Pac as a member of the criminal crew "The Wrecking Crew", but instead, it's the story of a life that began again seven years ago.

When Jarrell Daniels is convicted of attempted murder with a firearm, he is eighteen. He had gotten into a fight with members of a rival gang while trying to defend his sister; the situation escalated, and he pulled out the gun he carried, firing the shot that changed the course of his life. Before that moment, etched both into the scar that runs across his face and into his memory, Jarrell had already come face-to-face with the justice system: if you're a young African American man from the South Bronx and part of a gang, when the police show up on your block you know you'll be arrested even if you've done nothing. You're used to being nothing, that's what people expect from you. You bounce from one system to another without being seen: first school, then social services, and finally the white judge who reads your file and sentences you to years in prison.

From that moment on, it's no longer the code of the streets that applies, but the code of prison. After the first year on Rikers Island - New York's notorious jail complex known for overcrowding, violence, and high suicide rates - Jarrell is transferred to a state prison. He is still a member of the Bloods, one of the most notorious street gangs. Many people join once inside, to secure protection; in Jarrell's case, the bond was born in the neighborhood, and the challenge isn't getting accepted, it's breaking free from the red flag, the symbol of belonging. "I was sitting in my cell feeling ashamed, not just of myself but of the disappointment I'd caused my mother. How could I redeem myself from all this?" Freedom is not a straight path, especially when you've never known anything but the destiny that seemed laid out for you. "So the day the Bloods were preparing to clash with the Latin Kings, their rival Hispanic gang inside the prison, all the blood members in the prison—including Jarrell—were expected to attend a meeting at the Nation of Islam (NOI) chapel - the African American religious organization that offers services and study programs to inmates. Jarrell mistakenly thought the meeting was called to retrieve weapons for the uprising, not to hear the sermon that would change his life. "I listened to that sermon and thought: damn, I'm ready to give my life up and never actually did anything with life. That's what gave me the courage to

ask the gang leader to let me go”. It’s an ordinary day in the prison yard; his companions have gone out for recreation and Jarrell has followed, carrying the weight of his thoughts. He paces, searching for the right words to ask for freedom. He knows it won’t be easy. His mother had asked him to wait, because being without protection while still inside is dangerous, but for him the moment has come, and he finds the strength to truly change.

Facing the world with this renewed awareness forces Jarrell to expose himself with no armor, knowing that the people who had once stood by him might not accept the new version of him. “My loyalty was to my friends who were in prison because of me. At first, I was struggling with the identity shift because these people put their freedom on the line. I didn’t ask them to do that. They just did that. I’ll never forget that.”

But it is by passing through this identity crisis that Jarrell begins asking the questions that will turn his individual choices into a project for the community.

Project Restore is a policy proposal born behind prison walls; Jarrell Daniels developed it working with Nigel Farinha, the district attorney assigned to his case. “His mentality was: ‘If you break the law, you’re going to jail. And if you shoot someone, you go to prison. I don’t care what you think, I don’t care what you feel. I have nothing to say to you’”.

The original idea was to prevent gun violence and gang affiliation by working directly with communities, giving participants the opportunity to transform their lives through career-readiness programs and psychological support, an alternative to punishment designed to trigger a ripple effect. The principle is the same that drives *Pay It Forward*, the 2000 film in which Haley Joel Osment’s young character, tasked with answering the question “What does the world want from us?”, comes up with a system to change the world by performing good deeds and asking those who receive them to do something meaningful for three other people.

But the hard part wasn’t writing the proposal. It was presenting it to government agencies and convincing them it wasn’t utopian but an investment, because gun violence is overwhelmingly concentrated in under-resourced neighborhoods and perpetrated by a small number of young people. Addressing the personal, community, and socio-economic factors that lead to violent crime can therefore have a significant impact. A truth reflected in the life of someone who first encountered violence as a child.

On April 6, 2011, Terry Buggs, who at the time was 54 years old, returned home. He lives in Brooklyn, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area, in one of the NYCHA (New York City Housing Authority) complexes, massive public housing buildings known for their red bricks, open courtyards, and high crime rates.

It is just past 3 p.m.; at that hour both his son and daughter-in-law should be at work. However, the front door is wide open. Buggs decides to enter and finds the floor covered with broken glass, overturned furniture, and the acrid smell of fear in the air. He rushes to the basement. The rest of the story is reported in the newspapers the next day: two men were found tied up, gagged, and shot in the head. One of the victims was Jason Bostic, 30 years old, recently married, with three children and a fourth on the way. Mr. Bostic lived in the house with his wife, Mona. They had fallen in love as children and grown up together, marrying two summers prior in a large wedding in St. Thomas, V.I. Their nine-year-old twins, at the time of the incident, were at school.

“The day my father died,” recounts Jason Bostic Junior, “two girls had invited me to the spring dance. I was super excited; I looked a lot like my dad. My father was a charming guy, very popular with women, and I thought, ‘I can’t wait to go home and tell him.’”

That afternoon, however, there was no room for excitement. Jason and his sister got in the car and watched their mother, driving, with red, watery eyes; during the ride home, a total silence prevailed. “When we got home, I ran up the stairs and picked up the landline, at that time no one had a cellphone. I called my dad: it rang, it rang, but he didn’t answer. I thought, ‘Dad always answers on the first ring, I’ll call him again.’ I did, but still no answer. Then my mother called me into the living room. She sat me down and said, ‘Jason, your father is dead.’ That was my first encounter with gun violence.”

From that moment on, the cocky kid eager to brag to his father about his success with girls closes himself off in silence. He finds therapy in basketball and a new home in the streets, because in the neighborhood there is always someone who understands you, someone who, like you, has lost a friend, a relative, or themselves. Jason tries not to get sucked into that gravitational pull; on the court he thrives, he is a rising star, and scholarships arrive one after another. He can leave the neighborhood, climb up from the depths where tragedy dragged him, and it seems like he has made it, despite everything, despite Covid forcing him back to Bed-Stuy, despite knowing what it means to live under constant surveillance - coming home from school and getting stopped by the police simply because he is a Black boy from a poor neighborhood and therefore automatically suspicious, despite the violence that took away his anchor point.

“I may seem like a cliché movie,” Jason tells me, his gaze drifting into memories as he rubs his hands, the word “family” tattooed across them. “But this is the life some people live, and we go through it without even realizing it.” For years, Jason kept asking himself one question, resisting the temptation to accept what would have been easier to label as destiny: why every time I try to escape, something is pulling me back? Then, one December day in 2022, the phone rings again, this time not the landline, but his cellphone. There has been a robbery; someone heard gunshots. Jason’s twin sister is killed at twenty, by a bullet, just days before Christmas.

At this point, in a film script, the protagonist would give in and demand revenge from a life that has already taken so much from him. But in this life, instead, another young man enters carrying a project.

“The first time I met Jarrell, in January 2023, I thought he was lying to us. He told us he had been able to change his life; it seemed too good to be true.” Over time, however, skepticism gives way to the possibility of imagining a different future. Through Project Restore, Jarrell, and the other young people involved, gain access to a support network. “When I formed this chosen family, my mindset started to change. I stopped trying to do things myself and leaned on the support I had around me.”

Today, the project launched in January 2023 has contributed to a 30% reduction in shootings, ten of the original thirty participants are now in university, and one of them, Jason, has become the program coordinator. Others attend community colleges and have become facilitators, teaching younger generations that the cycle of violence can be broken.

Even the biggest dreams, however, come at a cost, and political dynamics shape change. “It’s like a pendulum swinging back and forth: you make progress, then you fall back,” Jarrell tells me as he reflects on the outcomes of a plan that managed to leave the pages of the notebooks he wrote in prison. “It’s hard, because you always depend on whichever administration is in power. So I’m starting to look more and more at non-traditional funding sources instead of relying only on government money. I think we need a new strategy. A new approach.”

When you become the representation of an entire community, people expect you to have answers. You can’t afford to disappoint those who have only hope left, so you don’t offer empty promises, you prepare them for reality. That’s what Jarrell does with the young people he mentors: “In individual meetings I always ask just one thing: ‘What do you need right now?’ Most people never ask kids that, but I know what it feels like to be in their place. That’s where you start.”

On Broadway, in front of the red-brick building overlooking the Park Ave playground, a boy licks the sticky strip on his King Size rolling paper before rolling a joint. He checks that the smoke won’t bother me and then lights up. He’s there with a friend, the same one who moments earlier had disappeared into the marijuana haze. He has never been to prison, but his brother has. Now, though, his brother works and helps the younger kids get out of the life that once trapped him.

I watch the scene, the people going in and out of the same building, greeting each other, knowing each other, because the neighborhood is family regardless of what it does to you. And that’s when I recall Jarrell’s words, spoken across the meeting-room table at the Center for Justice, where Project Restore now has its operational home:

“It’s like being part of a mechanical system that swallows you and spits you out, because it’s normal to see people like me on the news committing crimes. That’s what comes to people’s minds, even without realizing it”. The way we see people matters. And representation in places of power matters.

“I was arrested eight or nine times before the major charge.

I never saw a Black lawyer.

Never saw a Black judge.

Never a Black prosecutor.

They understood nothing about me.

In court they didn’t even look in my direction. Just the judge, the prosecutor, the lawyer.

Never me.

And that was my life.”