

SAFETY

As Toronto grapples with gun violence, residents of one troubled housing project have found a quiet but effective way to reduce crime. **JOYCE YOUNG** tells their story.

The building that fought back

In a neighbourhood notorious for poverty and street drugs, in a city reeling from gun violence, I have witnessed hope: a supportive housing project peacefully rid its building of drug trafficking.

Called in to help, I watched as a community circle was created – a joint effort by tenants, staff, police, a lawyer and a private security firm. In six months, this diverse group became a team and the nightly number of people let into the building to buy crack dropped from 45 users a night to five.

The housing project, in Toronto's Regent Park, supports formerly homeless people who are trying to turn their lives around. They include survivors of childhood sexual abuse, people struggling with addiction or mental illness and recent immigrants. They have all been on the street. They are people who share a street culture characterized by the despair of poverty and the victimization of violence. They also share fear and distrust, pain which they cover with the thin veneer of being cool and tough.

The director of the project asked me to facilitate a meeting between staff and tenants to deal with issues in a shared outdoor space, the



courtyard. I suggested a circle process because it gives everybody an equal voice. We thought we might have two meetings.

Our first dealt with annoying issues of noise and garbage in the courtyard. But by the second, the fearsome issue of drug trafficking in the building was in our laps.

It began when a man, who had not been to the circle, swept in and said " I just passed five junkies stoned out of their gourds. There are needles in the stairwell and people passed out in the laundry room. They're smoking up all over the place. And they're dangerous. I mean, you are good people but I'm telling you: Don't mess with them. You get between a junkie and his stuff and you're dead, man.

Real dead." He ranted for about five minutes and left.

The group was in shock. The safe space of the circle had been violated. Many possible interventions raced through my mind. I chose to trust the integrity of the circle.

A tenant (who I will call Jane) had been curled up in a foetal position, crying as that man spoke. When the talking piece came around to her, she cycled from fear to anger. She threw the talking piece on the floor and bolted. Jane had expressed the feelings of many.

After she left, the conversation turned towards, "What can we do?" Tenants talked about getting security cameras, confronting the people coming in to buy drugs, calling the police.

The question of bringing in the police was very controversial. But as the talking piece was passed around and people listened, a consensus emerged. A tenant who had been opposed to involving the police said, "Let's bring a police officer to the circle, so that we can learn how to work with the police more effectively as a community." The group agreed.

By the third meeting, it seemed that there were two minor dealers and one major crack dealer, (who I will call Johnny) living in the building. Suzy (not her real name), who lives with one of the minor crack dealers, had come to the meeting. A police officer was our guest.

We discussed the value of humility. Jane said she learned humility, "When I found out my five-year-old daughter was dying and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it." The police officer said, "Every day time I hug and kiss my kids before I go to work, I am reminded of my humility I have a dangerous job to do and I do it with humility, because I want to come back home to my family."

The police officer didn't judge them, or give them attitude. He talked about personal safety, emergency priorities, physical changes they could make to the building. He took up the group's hope to get the drug traffic out of the building: "I will commit to this if you will. If you will step up, I will step up." Specific strategies and ideas were generated. The officer suggested we reduce the number of entrances to the building. The director explained that the fire code requires four exits. A tenant suggested that two of the exits could be locked one way, so that you could get out but not get in. The collaboration produces a rough plan.

This Circle meeting felt like a turning point to me. Staff and tenants were becoming a team. Tenants felt empowered by new information and by seeing some of their suggestions implemented. The group had an energy and engagement. More tenants were showing up for meetings. The tenants decided to post the circle meeting minutes around the building.

It's surprising that, sometimes, just when I think that things are getting better, they get worse. A week later the director called me and said, "We are in crisis. The 'businessmen' moved in this week. They beat up Johnny, took over his unit are dealing heroin out of here. I've hired a lawyer and he's coming to our next circle meeting."

Two more tenants, who I later learned are the small time dealers, had joined the Circle. One of them, who I will call Tony, stayed for the whole meeting and did not say a single word. But he was listening. Suzy was back again.

The lawyer explained the rights of landlords and tenants. He emphasized specific information. He explained that evicting a tenant through the Housing Tribunal is a long and expensive proposition. He suggested other strategies, advised of additional funding sources for security guards.

Suzy's partner, a small-time dealer, came in, sat in the lawyer's chair and started to talk.. This man had never been

to a circle before, but I think Suzy had filled him in. He was straight. He said, "I don't know many of you, but if I've ever frightened or intimidated you, which probably I have, I apologize. I know I do bad things when I am high. I'm trying to kick the drugs. We are trying to get our kids back. I'm trying to turn my life around and it's really, really hard." Then he left.

By this point all of the drug-involved tenants but Johnny had come to the circle. At her turn Jane said "Enough talk. Let's do something. Let's send a message that we are taking back our homes. You know what I'd love to see: Friday night, 10 members of the Christian bikers power over here and line up their hogs in front of this place."

This seed of an idea sprouted and grew as the talking piece went around. A tenant said, "It should be a vigil to keep our home safe. Let's send the message that this is a Christian, family building." The tenants got on board: "I'll put signs up... I'll get candles...I'll bring the song sheets... I'll call the media..."

The Chair of the Board said he wanted all Board and staff to do their best to be there.

Ten days later, the tenants and staff held the vigil. All kinds of people came. The media came. Board members came. Suits came. By the end of the next day, the Executive Director instructed the Director to "hire a private security firm and get them in there now. I

don't know how we will pay for it, but we'll figure that out later."

Every change creates its own set of issues. Many were glad to see security in the building. The heroin dealers moved out of Johnny's unit shortly after the security came in. But there were altercations between tenants and security staff. One tenant filed a complaint of racial profiling. The Director invited the lead security person to the next Circle meeting.

The value for this meeting was empathy. The reading for the opening ritual began like this: "Longfellow wrote, 'If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.'" Jane said, "Sometimes I think I'm wonderful and sometimes I think I'm horrible. But today I realized that I was thinking that way because I was seeing everything through the filter of my 5-year-old daughter's death. Today I realized that I could choose to put that filter away. I can put myself aside, which is hard to do, and give empathy."

Our guest, the young security guard, said, "When I was 7 years old, a police officer took me away from my parents because they were beating on me. I'm training to be a police officer. I'm a security guard. Empathy is why I'm here. I don't want any of your kids to go through what I did. And, if

we don't get the drugs out of this building, they will."

The altercations had been about security guards asking tenants for identification. The group discussed the issues and designed a respectful identification system for tenants and their legitimate guests.

Tenants reported that for the first time they felt safe in the building and could get a good night's sleep. Staff reported, "We've gone from 45 illegal entries a night down to 10, and 5 of those 10 were by Johnny going for walks late at night, or doing his business elsewhere."

Towards the end, the security guard said, "You have something very special going on for you. Security can't do it alone. I've been in buildings where the tenants either don't care, or they are too afraid to speak out. Somehow, by coming together, you've got something very special going on, and I'm proud to be a part of it."

That was our November meeting. Looking back, I agree. By coming together in a community Circle, this group found the courage to move from the paralysis of victimization to the action of empowerment, on so many levels. This group has a new confidence and connection. They have made a difference. Jane fled the first meeting in angry tears, but she not only came back, she became a

leader and she learned that she has choices.

Looking back, I realize that I too am changed. I am humbled by being at the service of the Circle.

One solution, or one community process will never solve the complex problem of gun violence. Perhaps the root problem is poverty, or racism. The violence that is upon our schools and cities has taken on the dimensions of King Kong, leaving us feeling frightened and paralyzed in its shadow. We can't imagine how to take it on.

The community Circle at the housing project is a microcosm of these complex issues. They didn't set out to take on the drug trade. They set out to take on the noise and garbage. Their journey was no more predictable than the course of an aged, meandering river. This Circle taught me that the important thing is to come together and take on one thing that affects you: the thing that you can see and hear, is the thing that you can change.

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