

the south side

"the little locs are getting a little too loced."

— ice cube

In Miami, Florida, a 12-year-old has been dubbed the "Crime Kid" by authorities because of his 56 arrests. In Washington, DC, pre-teenagers charged with gun possession are becoming commonplace. In Dade County, Florida—which is dominated by the city of Miami—the murder tally for the year 1990 was 128. In Atlanta, and other large cities across the country, the story is much the same.



atlanta youth task force takes back the streets.

Beleaguered communities nationwide have their hands full in working with "crime kids." Many youths are turned over to a criminal justice system ill-equipped to do anything but warehouse them until they become adults. And most experts agree that society gains little by abandoning youths to the "system."

Check this scene which took place in Atlanta, Georgia, 1984: A boys' basketball game was underway at a neighborhood recreation center when tempers flared. A fight broke out between the teams. A player on the winning team picked up a bat, while a player on the losing squad retrieved a gun from a school van. Spotting the gun, and realizing the danger, an 18-year-old referee cautiously intervened and managed to stop the brother from pulling the trigger.

That day affected the young referee, Mike Weaver, in a big way. In fact, it's the reason that he's involved today in improving his community.

Weaver, founder of the Atlanta University Center Task Force in 1988, truly believes that, "It is a personal responsibility [for everyone] to give back to our community." The task force was designed to train college volunteers to work in youth development programs in the Atlanta area.

Today, students from Morehouse, Spelman, Clark and Morris Brown colleges each volunteer one hour a week to Atlanta's youths, through Boys and Girls Clubs, after-school programs, senior citizen centers and even nurseries.

In April 1990, Weaver won the City of Atlanta's "volunteer of the year" award for his efforts. To him, though, it's all in a day's work, so he's taking the praise in stride: "Giving back is something I always saw my mother doing. Volunteering is a part of me."

It's a similar story in Miami, where concerned parents in Dade County founded the Youth Crime Watch organization (YCW). Ricky Wiggins, director of YCW, says that the organization "gives alternatives to violence and conflict situations, as well as education and information on issues such as self-esteem, date rape, gangs and violence." With the help of the school board, YCW has chapters in more than 100 area elementary, middle and high schools.

YCW sponsors programs such as the Key Club, where students visit hospitals and speak with elderly patients, and Viking Vogue, a modeling club at Miami Norland Senior High School that holds annual fashion shows as fundraisers to raise money for the Sickle Cell Foundation. YCW also hosts Miami Clean Up, in which students volunteer to clean up parks, beaches and highways. Yet, the most prominent club is Varsity Patrol (V.P.).

V.P. arms students with leadership skills and places them as student officers assigned to prevent conflicts and stand as role models within their respective high schools. Chris Leslie, 18, president of V.P. at Miami Norland, became involved in YCW through a sponsor at his school. Leslie, who himself prevented a possible stabbing, says that being a part of YCW "is a good feeling. V.P. is a very dependable club."

"Even though YCW was established by adults, the kids are really running it," says Wiggins. Vernet Joseph, 16, vice president of the club, describes how he has changed through YCW, particularly through Varsity Patrol: "When I first entered as a freshman, I was a kid with no guidance. V.P. taught me how to be a leader and encouraged me to help young people."

—gabriel benn and kenneth carroll > page 77



miami youth varsity patrol.