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In Fight to Save Young People, Brooklyn Doctor Treats Violence as a Public Health Issue



Dr. Robert Gore at Kings County Hospital Center in Brooklyn. His work there helped convince him to view bloodshed as a disease.

DAVID GONZALEZ / THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Side Street

By DAVID GONZALEZ

Dr. Robert Gore was stirred awake one morning in July by an urgent phone call from work. That was not unusual, given his job in the emergency department at [Kings County Hospital Center](#) in Brooklyn, a level-one trauma center that provides the highest level of care. Still, his years of skillful, coolheaded practice, of stopping bleeding and saving lives, had not prepared him for what he heard.

Young had been stabbed.

Young was Willis Young, 27, one of a small group of people Dr. Gore had enlisted to cool tempers and stop retaliation whenever a young person was brought to the hospital after being shot, stabbed or beaten. An argument with a friend had left Mr. Young critically wounded on a Brooklyn street. Days later, still in the intensive care unit, he died.

Dr. Gore recalled that grim summer day months later, as the leaves turned orange and the air chill. Other young men had died since then, despite his best efforts at the hospital. But that had not dimmed his dedication to what he sees as his duty — not just as a physician, but as an African-American man committed to his community — to find alternatives to violence. For him, that means continuing Mr. Young’s work, as well as redoubling his own efforts in working with almost 100 teenagers in a mentoring program called the [Kings Against Violence Initiative](#).

“When he was stabbed, everything became more real about what we were doing,” Dr. Gore said of Mr. Young. “It personalized what we were doing. All I know is we have somebody doing violence intervention and all of a sudden he is not here. This was avoidable. It’s not a freak car accident. This is somebody who died at the hands of violence.”

Dr. Gore, 39, speaks not just from the perspective of his position at the trauma center. As a native of Brooklyn who has lived in Fort Greene and Bedford-Stuyvesant, he has a personal stake in the issue. And as the son of a schoolteacher and activist, he felt it was in his blood to not just bemoan a community’s misfortunes, but also to do something about them. His epiphany came during his residency at Cook County Hospital in Chicago on a rainy day, when a fellow resident said he hoped that “something exciting” would happen.

“What he meant to say was he hoped we had some penetrating trauma,” Dr. Gore recalled. “When that comes in, there’s always a level of excitement, an opportunity to do something that can be lifesaving. Then I looked around the room and it was me, a nurse and a clerk who were the only people of color. That’s when you start looking at the problem from a different point of view because they look like me or one of my relatives. I started thinking, ‘What can I do to help this?’ ”

The result — put together over years of research and brainstorming — began to take shape in 2011, when Dr. Gore and some like-minded friends and professionals started what became the Kings Against Violence Initiative, which they at first financed on their own. For their mentorship program, they went to the old George W. Wingate High School in Brooklyn, which had been divided into a set of smaller schools, and offered to help students who were considered at risk or otherwise in need of guidance.

Today, the initiative and Dr. Gore work with young people whom they are trying to steer clear of trouble and into college. Dr. Gore likes to remind them that while conflict may not be avoidable, violence is. Many have learned to rely on one another, rather than drift to street corners where trouble awaits.

“Before, if I got into problems, I had more of a violent way to handle it,” Jude Bonney, a senior at the [High School for Public Service](#), said. “Here I learned how that can be prevented in the first place, by being aware of my surroundings.”

The approach that Dr. Gore put in place has become part of a larger effort by the city’s [Health and Hospitals Corporation](#), which has similar programs at [Harlem Hospital Center](#) in Manhattan and [Jacobi Medical Center](#) in the Bronx. The programs share a belief that law enforcement alone cannot eliminate violence among young people. A preventive public health approach is needed.

“If violence is a disease, you need a vaccination,” Erik Cliette, who directs the corporation’s [Guns Down, Life Up](#) initiative, said. “If you address violence the way we addressed smoking, the whole concept of how we look at violence will change.”

Dr. Gore had already come to that conclusion by the time he began working at Kings County. Some days he would stitch up someone he had known since childhood. Other days he would return to his Bed-Stuy block to hear that someone he knew from the neighborhood had been hurt.

He met Mr. Young not far from his home a few years ago, and was impressed by his curiosity. When he had the idea to have people intervene at the trauma center to stop the cycle of violence and retaliation, he found Mr. Young to be someone teenagers could relate to: He had dabbled in the street life, lost his father at an early age and had relatives who had had brushes with the law.

“He would know the people who came into the E.R.,” Dr. Gore said. “Brooklyn is big, but it ain’t that big.”

Mr. Young’s death made the borough feel a lot smaller, and emptier.

A grand jury has not handed up an indictment in Mr. Young’s death, although the man with whom he had the fatal confrontation, Chad Hollingsworth, has been charged with second-degree attempted murder, prosecutors said.

According to a complaint, Mr. Hollingsworth told the police he got into an argument over remarks Mr. Young made about a young woman. Mr. Hollingsworth said that Mr. Young had pushed him into a car and that in the ensuing struggle, a knife had fallen from Mr. Young's belt. Mr. Hollingsworth picked up the knife.

Stephen Drummond, Mr. Hollingsworth's lawyer, said his client — whom he described as having never had trouble before with the law — was not interested in a plea bargain, but was willing to cooperate with the authorities in the hope that he would be exonerated.

“It's a very sad case, because these two gentlemen were friends,” Mr. Drummond said. “The evidence will establish that my client had absolutely no choice but to do that which he had to do to save his own life.”

The impact of Mr. Young's death is still being felt. It has started heartfelt discussions among young people and driven Dr. Gore and his colleagues to consider how they can start addressing the larger social and economic issues facing the community.

“There's a time to mourn, and we honor that,” Dr. Gore said. “At the same time, we have work to be done. This is still a part of our community's reality. I can't point fingers at who is responsible for doing what. This is my neighborhood, my hospital and I can't expect others to take care of it if I'm not involved.”