



A COMMUNITY MANIFESTO

The ruin of a nation begins in the home of its people – Ashanti Proverb

Today our community is at a crossroads. We are appalled at the shootings and senseless deaths of our young people. After all, these are our sons and daughters, our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, and cousins who are killing each other. These are our children, who are dying or maimed at the hands of other children! In good conscience, we can no longer sit quietly, wringing our hands and shaking our heads at the latest news accounts announcing that another life has been lost. These seemingly senseless murders, though committed by few, have created a cycle of violence and trauma experienced by everyone living, working and owning businesses in our community. This culture of violence, which has threatened the lifeblood of our community, is so pervasive that if things do not change, the community will descend into further chaos and lawlessness. Yes, we are at a very important crossroads, and it is time for a change.

Now is the time to stand up and not be afraid to say, “No More!” When mothers have to snatch up their children in fear at a public event because of a shooting, something must be done! When our elders are so fearful they cannot walk outside of their homes, something must be done! When schoolchildren witness a person wounded and bloodied outside of their school building, something must be done! We are living in a culture of violence where a few people, bent on death and destruction, have held the entire community hostage! Something must be done!

There is a multitude of underlying causes for this culture of violence that are so pervasive in our community – causes that include rage and anger, apathy and denial, under-employment, mis-education, and racism. The rise of the “prison industrial complex” and the glamorization of gangster-like activity can also be included. The roots of this culture of violence, continuing to escalate in this community, may call for further debate. This document addresses the trauma of loss and pain felt by so many people as a result of this violence—trauma and stress that have caused untold damage to our collective psyche.

From our elders to people living with disabilities, to our young school children, to every individual in the community, including the victims and their families – everyone is vulnerable. It is damaging to the health of the community when the trauma of loss and pain continue to escalate. Boldly stated, we must work diligently to heal the trauma because we have a responsibility to the life, health and vitality of the community. We can no longer afford to let a few violent people, who seemingly operate under a law unto themselves and who are preying on their own communities continue to hold the rest of us hostage.

Today, we must look toward one another for answers not so easily explained. While moving forward we must look backward, inspired by our cherished brothers and sisters of the early Civil Rights Movements and the Black Power Movement, and seek guidance to continue this fight to

heal and to save our community. There are many lessons they taught us about self-determination, building and uplifting the community and empowering entire generations to change. Sadly, today, not only are we still fighting our traditional enemies, we must also acknowledge the historical enemy that has always been with us, one that is getting stronger – and that is the enemy within.

Who are some of those enemies that threaten the lifeblood of the community? Many of them are our own youth, between the ages of 12 and 25, who are responsible for the shootings and killings we see almost nightly on the evening news. They are the people selling guns, even AK-47s, to our youth. They are the ones committing drive-by shootings and gangster-like executions in front of residents, and in public places. They are the drug dealers selling in and around schools, near senior citizen buildings, on street corners, and in business areas. Indeed, all areas of the community *must* be considered drug free zones. Furthermore, the youth are not the only people responsible for perpetuating this culture of violence. We know that many adults are also committing and supporting these violent acts against the community.

Today, we must honestly ask ourselves – why have we, the community, allowed the violence to escalate? Why does it appear that most of us sit by, wringing our hands in despair and lamenting, “*Somebody must do something before it’s too late!*” How long are we going to let the police do it, the government do it, the social service agencies do it, and the churches do it? How long will we continue to let this fear paralyze us to inaction? How long will we allow this fear to embolden the enemy to maintain its hold on us? What can we, the community, do for ourselves to end this “madness?”

We must seize the time to reclaim our community, now!

Therefore, *everyone* living and working in the community must accept the challenge to:

- **Become active!** Do not be afraid to take up the fight! We, the citizens who live, work, and worship in this community have a great responsibility. We must restore our own community to its original greatness. Too many of us are waiting for *someone else* to end our bondage of fear. We expect the police, our elected officials, or the leaders of organizations and agencies to clean up our streets for us. They cannot do it alone.
- **Encourage** the youth to lead this struggle for the life of our community, for it is their struggle as well. When the youth took up the struggle during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, they made great strides, as well as tremendous sacrifices for all of us. Because of their courage and commitment, the entire community was galvanized and empowered. Today, it is just as important for the new movement to come directly from the youth, who are most affected by the culture of violence pervading our communities.
- **Speak** boldly and forthrightly to your own family members who are committing destructive actions against the community. Do not accept their behavior or their money.
- **Join** with those courageous men and women who actually walk and talk with the “brothers and sisters” on the block. Come out to stand along side of those who are strongly visible at the scene of every shooting or act of violence. We serve notice that we will no longer hide. We will no longer tolerate this continued bondage of fear.

- **Proclaim** that responsible reporting is not “snitching.” It is our civic duty. Responsible reporting should not only address crime and violence in the community. It should also include a platform for addressing any issues that negatively affect the community and directly contribute to the demise and degradation of the community as a whole.
- **Create** a web of block watch programs that stay connected with one another in every neighborhood to enhance community engagement. Communities in Allegheny County and beyond could develop a working communication initiative such as a Community House reporting system, a vehicle through which each community directly can address any issues that confront a particular neighborhood. A community-appointed team would be responsible for deciphering, validating and forwarding information to the appropriate

parties. Such a system would empower neighborhood communities to take responsibility for their own issues, and serve as a trustworthy resource that would also support initiatives such as the City of Pittsburgh Citizen’s Observer Reporting System. Furthermore, instituting such an initiative would bring pride back into the communities, and serve as a powerful “voice” for community self-reliance, accountability and empowerment.

- **Establish** an open relationship with the police to curb destructive behavior in each and every community. Furthermore, we must strengthen existing relationships between the community and the police.
- **Work** proactively to defuse conflicts occurring among and between families, neighborhoods, and gang members in the community. This is the source of much of the violence in the schools.
- **Provide** an outlet in each community for resolving conflicts *before* they escalate into violence, by creating community-based mediation offices staffed by community residents trained in conflict management and dispute resolution. Staff must have an understanding of, and utilize, ways of solving conflicts that are culturally relevant for the communities served. Furthermore, all community members must be encouraged to advocate for programs that protect victims of violent crimes, and support the notion of restorative justice for those who commit acts of violence.
- **Join**, be active and support existing organizations that are working for social justice, community empowerment, economic empowerment, and violence reduction. Every eligible citizen must make a lifetime commitment to vote in *each and every election* to create, and sustain, the *political will* to support such initiatives.
- **Build** bridges of understanding and cooperation as we collectively rid the community of the reckless violence that plagues us. There are many different institutions and organizations – street, grassroots, community-based, social service agencies, and communities of faith -- already doing the work of community-building. They are working diligently to bring a change in the community. No group is more or less valuable, competent, or viable than the next. Therefore, there must be greater solidarity among those groups and their leaders who are doing similar work. Everyone must take on the responsibility for working to end the culture of violence that is sucking dry the lifeblood of our community.

- **Serve** notice -- collectively, loudly, and visibly -- to those who continue to escalate this culture of violence. We will no longer silently stand by and accept these devastating and vicious acts committed by our youth or by anyone else who are the perpetrators of death and destruction.

It has been said that, "all this talk of peace and love will not change things." However, to work toward peace is a courageous act of love. To be empowered for change is the result of love. Breathing life and humanity back into the community is a true demonstration of love.

Therefore, *we the community*, proclaim we will no longer be hostages to those who prey on the community through this culture of violence. Because we love our community, we *will* come back outside. We *will* take back our streets – block by block, and by any means necessary!