Disinvested
Episode 2: Community Safety

Warren Hardy: When I was 9-years-old, I was actually suspended from school for fighting and in my house – I used to live on Earle Street– my mom comes home and she's like, "You've been home all day and you ain't take out this garbage." She's getting on my case about it and then I'm like, alright, I'll take out the garbage right now. In the process of taking out the garbage I go outside – and in the back of my house, there was a basketball court. I go outside, I'm looking and there's a guy being shot, like up close and personal. To the point, he must've got shot like five or six times. I could see. It was so visual. I could see the bullets going in, I could see the flesh tearing from his body, and I'm saying to myself, "Is this real," because he's not falling. He was a big person. It's just too surreal to actually believe it was this up close and personal.

It was real. He did eventually fall. I went back in the house and I told my mom what happened, and….

Background music…

…just like, I think like plenty of other kids, it got kind of swept underneath the rug.

Tyler Johnson: Welcome to DISINVESTED, a podcast about reimagining a city and building a stronger and more inclusive community from the ground up. Created by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. I'm Tyler Johnson.

You just heard from Hartford resident Warren Hardy. Warren is the founder of HYPE, which stands for Helping Young People Evolve. Like so many other people in our city, Warren first experienced violence at an early age. That experience, mixed with other traumas of growing up in an urban environment, took a toll on Warren.

In this episode, we're going to talk about Community Safety. It's important to note that crime and violence, like so many other things, are not equally distributed.

Hartford has gained a reputation for being a dangerous city, but most of the residents who live here will go their whole life without being the victim of a major crime. More than 100,000 people commute into the city every day for work and fun, and most of them are never impacted. For those in certain neighborhoods, however, it's a different story.

Community safety is about lowering crime rates. It's about improving the perception of our city and making Hartford a more attractive place to live and work. It's *also* about caring for those most affected by crime and violence. Each life lost to violence is a tragedy, but there's also a tragedy of lost potential. Each kid forced to live under constant trauma and threat of violence is a loss for our community at large. They could be flourishing, but instead, they're struggling just

to survive. Warren Hardy overcame mountains of adversity to become a positive influence in his community. Many kids in our region aren't so lucky.

To truly make our community safer, we have to go beyond reacting to crime and address the roots of the problem.

Here's more from Warren.

Warren Hardy: Well, it affected my psyche to the point where I kind of took it on as a normal thing because that was like the first time but then, I continued to see other acts of violence. Whether it was gunshots, somebody being beat up, or stabbed, the one thing that was common was that it was never addressed. It was like, okay this is life.

Iran Nazario: My father would abuse my mom and my mom was pregnant with me at the time. I've come to learn that even in the womb, you're exposed to violence and trauma. Iran Nazario, President & CEO of the Peace Center of Connecticut.

I grew up in that household and eventually outside of that household addicted and believing that violence was an option that you always turned to in order to control someone. So for me, it was really important that I was as strong as I could be, that I was as angry as I could be, and that I was unafraid at every moment because fighting and violence was going to be my remedy to everything.

By the age of 11, I had a number of fights and I witnessed my first homicide. I think it slowly escalated to becoming almost like a need. There were instances where if I hadn't fought or if I hadn't gotten into conflict I was not feeling right; I felt like my day wasn't complete. At the age of 13, I stabbed my girlfriend four times. Again, I thought she deserved it. I thought that that was the answer to controlling her.

The first gang that I joined I was in my teenage years, and I use the term "gang" loosely on that one. It was just a couple of friends that wanted to have a name and be recognized for something. We called ourselves the GQ Crew and I was 11-years-old.

I didn't really know much about gangs or anything like that, but when you talk about the more serious gangs; the Los Solidos Gangs, which I was a member of for a number of years– I would equate it to a family. The gang lifestyle is very tragic but it was also a very supportive life too. There are people that care about you genuinely. They will sacrifice everything. It's just that when you're involved in it, the negative is always going to be involved.

Then at 27, I was indicted by the FBI for some crimes we had committed. That's when I finally was like, okay, I need to figure out a way to remove myself completely from this life or I'm going to continue to come back to prison.

"News from the overnight, police are looking for those responsible for the shooting of three men in Hartford…"

"We are following some developing news from Hartford's South end where a shootout in the Capital city in the middle of the day left four people wounded…"

"Police say a 15-year-old was shot and killed last night…"

"Hartford 911, what is the location of your emergency. Uh, Bulkeley High School.."

David Owens: My name is David Owens and I'm a reporter with the Hartford Courant. I cover courts and crime. There's just been a steady run of gun violence. It's staggering the toll it takes and it's frustrating. I don't know that there has been a worsening of the situation, it's just been this steady, sad story of gunfire and gun crime in Hartford that just keeps claiming young lives.

I think it just gets back to the problems of an urban community – a lack of jobs, a lack of opportunity. I've heard stories about the trauma, especially that children experience from living in a community– from living in a neighborhood– where there's high crime, where's there's gunfire. These kids can't go outside or they've got to worry about a bullet coming through a window or coming through a wall of their house. It takes a toll.

I think vital cities are critical to any community. Those of us who live in the suburbs, live in the suburbs of Hartford. Hartford is the center and if Hartford's not successful, that's not good for any of us. But the other crime, the less serious crime, although not less serious to the victims – burglaries, car break-ins, and car thefts. That spreads to a much wider area.

The other part of it, of course is the tremendous number of good and wonderful law abiding people in Hartford who are getting by, living their lives, and doing the best they can and they are victims of this conduct, as well.

Deborah Davis: Deborah Davis, Program Manager/Member of Mothers United Against Violence.

The primary reason and the focus point for Mothers United Against Violence; they were part of a group that had come together in Hartford to address some of the violence that had been occurring, but wasn't being addressed by other individuals. These were basic services – counseling, grief counseling, and trauma reduction – all of those things. Food, clothing – these were some of the things that were absolutely going just ignored. That was my goal to try to help others because I knew that the resources were not there. I knew that it was hard to access and individuals did not care about me and about my son the way I cared about my son.

Phillip was probably, I think in my mind, of course, and as one of the best moms in the world was the most unbelievable giving child that you could ever meet. He was very warm, generous, and always wanting to help other people. I knew at some point that he was going to be challenged because he was not, sort of, "of the norm," but he got bullied for that. He really got bullied for that. He got bullied for so many other things. He wanted to belong and a lot of young people are like that. They definitely want to fit in.

Tyler Johnson: *When it happened I wasn't even in town. I was in Florida and I heard about it. I like, this is crazy, because I knew him and we were close. I don't know what I'm going to say now but it's going to come. Okay, here we go.*

Tyler Johnson: Phillip Davis died from gun violence in 2010. He was 20 years old. Phillip was always the life of the party. He had everyone smiling, he loved masonry, and he was always very, very positive. I personally knew Phillip and he was a great person. Each victim of gun violence has a unique story, unique gifts and people who care about them. They all had so much more to give.

Last year the Hartford Foundation helped to create the Community Safety Coalition, a group of five grassroots organizations, including Mothers United Against Violence. These groups have been doing amazing work for years, but by combining efforts and sharing data, they'll have a wider reach and will hopefully be able to save more of the next generation of young people from violence.

Deborah Davis: We were making very small strides, but the Community Safety Coalition was almost as if they actually heard our cry, and it was a little louder. *Pause…*

Tom Zeleznock: Take your time.

Deborah Davis: You never know when that's going to come. Coming together with all of the groups that were actually doing the work, the work making a big difference in our communities- helping with the reduction of trauma, prevention of gun violence, stabilizing the neighborhood at large, and being able to have the resources to do that- that was a charge that we felt, *oh finally people can hear*.

Jay Williams: My name is Jay Williams. I'm the President and CEO of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. We are taking a more direct hands-on approach to community safety because of our conversations and experiences with the residents of the communities that the data demonstrates are being disproportionately affected and impacted by violence, in particular, gun violence. It is inescapable when you begin to drill down and understand the trauma that is inflicted upon families who are victims or families who live in those neighborhoods who are afraid to send their children out to the playground whether it's just down the block or across the street.

I have lived this as a resident of the community, I have lived this as a Mayor. We want to offer ourselves, not just the financial resources but the convening, the public policy resources, the capacity building resources and so far the response that we've gotten from those organizations is very much welcoming.

Tyler Johnson: You can't talk about community safety without mentioning the police. One of the biggest and most positive trends in police work over the past several years has been the rise in community policing. Brian Foley served as a Hartford police officer for more than 20

years. He is now the Commissioner's Aide for the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection.

Brian Foley: Community policing way back when I first started was just kind of getting the cops out on the beat more and developing relationships, because things over the last 50 to 100 years prior to that really had some bad things going on in law enforcement and police work. So it was a start to try to repair some of those fractured relationships that especially seemed to exist in urban or impoverished areas. Community policing is so much more than just throwing some pictures up on Facebook. It's long term commitments, it's understanding your community, it's having your relationships.

A city should have some say in how they are policed and in that, they need to know that they're involved in the decision making. You can see who comes to a scene and who really cares. You can see who comes to community meetings and who really cares. Try to concentrate on the people who really want to change things, who really want to do the work, who are going to be at the grassroots level and they care.

I don't care if they're critics of the police department – fantastic. In fact, our critics are our best compasses sometimes and can point us in the right direction, but we need them to care and want to do the work in the community. It's about forming coalitions with many – not just one, different types of groups out there. There's a lot of groups and those relationships don't come overnight.

Sgt. Steven Austin: My name is Steven Austin, a Sergeant with the Hartford Police Department. Currently, I'm assigned to the Community Response Division. Community policing, it's not just an effort it's something ingrained into the DNA of the department. It's a mindset where you are going to work knowing that the people that you serve are the most important people, the most important businesses, and everyone here has a special place and our job is to make them feel safe and secure. But also, that we're a part of the solution as opposed to being part of the problem.

It's hard to protect and serve if you don't respect first. That's always been my motto is that you have to respect before you can protect. From a law enforcement standpoint, I think the biggest misconception is that, in particular, when you're policing in an urban area, that people of color are all dangerous. We're seeing more and more diversity in law enforcement and I think that's helping a lot, not coming with preconceived notions of what individuals are and what a community is.

Then from the community standpoint, I think the misperception of the police is that all cops are out to get you. Law enforcement officers are human, they have emotions, they have wives, and they have children.

I'm an African American male and my experiences with law enforcement were negative. I have to really say that I didn't really appreciate some of the things that I know now as a law enforcement offer that law enforcement officers have to deal with on a daily basis. However,

that being said, I did know some officers who were good, who were very nice and I think that kind of stuck with me to somewhat of a degree in the back of my mind.

When the opportunity came for me to become a law enforcement officer here in the city, I also wanted to be a role model. When you come from a challenging area, one of the things that we don't see a lot is success. We want to make sure that more kids have the opportunity to have that kind of success and that's how you build that vibrant community.

Tyler Johnson: Sergeant Austin runs a number of events that he uses to build trust within the community. We asked him about one of his most popular events, a Friday night basketball league.

Sgt. Steven Austin: I can play, but I don't play that much anymore. Listen, I'm 56, they're 17 and it's a big difference. My thing was to go in, and I kind of sit on the sideline and you know tease them, like who can play and who can't play. Then they'll come in and sit down, and this is where relationships start. Now, our guards are down, we're talking, we're joking, we're laughing and individuals will open up to you. The conversations start with basketball but then they kind of segway into life. You know just be human, humanity – you'd be surprised. Especially from kids because kids, you know, they think no one listens to them.

It's little things, the minutia, that make up the big picture. A lot of times we want to get to the solution without doing the small work that builds that foundation.

Abdul-Rahmaan I. Muhammad: My name is Abdul-Rahmaan Ibn Muhammad and I'm the Executive Director of My People Clinical Services. For each person it's different, right? So people come to us having experienced various levels of trauma, and even their experience with the trauma that they've experienced, the way that they show it is different. So often times for us, what we're trying to do is provide them with the support and empowerment to help them get to the place where they can actually have a successful life.

It's also teaching them how to cope, trying to cope with the things that they are dealing with and the way they are feeling. Very quickly in our city what we see is that an argument can turn into something that causes somebody to go to the hospital. Especially the young men, the young boys, they're out there and they are so riled up all the time. Their baseline is like a ten and they don't even know it, so when they respond to something, it doesn't start like at a one, it's already at a ten because they have to kind of go harder than they should.

They don't even know the effects of what they've been experiencing – what they've seen, what they've heard, something that happened to somebody else they know – and so that's what we really have to work with people on, because violence begets violence. We get more violence because nobody is knows how to deal with it. If we could help people to kind of wind down, imagine if somebody is starting at a one instead of starting at a ten, maybe then they could be able to talk their way out of it as opposed to creating a new situation.

Tyler Johnson: Here, again, is Warren Hardy. After experiencing trauma in his youth, Warren turned to using and dealing drugs, stealing cars and other crimes. He joined a gang and was sentenced to 12 years in prison, ultimately serving six. After his release, Warren founded HYPE, Helping Young People Evolve, an organization dedicated to violence prevention. Here, Warren talks about something he calls "getting to the why."

Warren Hardy: Well the first thing I do is try to perform either CPR or first aid, but in more of a psychological sense, meaning if I meet a young person, my goal is to try to find out does this person have something to live for. They have been witness to the same trauma, the same violence that I myself have witnessed and it has been unaddressed. But the problem is that they're using that as an excuse to continue to kill or get themselves killed. I use all of those personal experiences as a way to say, "Hey, nobody owes you anything, but let me teach you some coping skills, some principles, and some morals that will help you be able to better deal with whatever situation might arise."

I try to make them understand that I need them as much as they need me. A lot of times, that is missing because we're always talking down to the kids, we're always telling the kids to do this and do that – a lot of adultism. I work with young people and when I've told them that I need them, you should see the look on their face. It's like, "What do you mean you need me!" "Yeah, I need you. I'm learning from you, in order for my survival, as you need to learn from me for your survival." But when we don't take those types of approaches, we kind of miss the opportunity to really be effective in working with these young people.

Well in March 2019, we had about four homicides in less than a week and to me, this was unacceptable. I was like something has to be done, so since March of 2019, every Thursday or Friday, I have been on the corner of either Garden and Mather or Garden and Westland, lighting candles to send a message of peace, love, life, light, unity, and nonviolence. A lot of times people come up and they ask the question, "Who died," and I'm able to say, "No one died." The sigh of relief that comes on their face is priceless.

Then when they say, "Well what is it about," and I tell them, "It's about peace." We try to bring light to these areas that have experienced too much darkness. I view this as a life and death situation. I know how I felt when I didn't have anybody to turn to when I felt all alone. We have to view these young people as our own kids…

Background music…

We have to be willing to risk our own lives in an attempt to save them…

Tyrek Marquez: At first it was just supposed to be a normal day. My whole family we always go to the Jamaican Parade every year, because that's where everybody's at for the day. Everybody is on Main Street because it's this big event. This day, it was already unusual because before I left the house I had already told my mom, I kind of feel like somebody is going to get shot.

Tyler Johnson: That's Tyrek Marquez.

Tyrek Marquez: When I was seven, I was already used to hearing gunshots, I was already used to people dying everybody. I was immune to that. It bothered me but I was already prepared for the worse at all times.

I was with my sister and her friend. My sister was a teenager at the time. We ended up going back to the house because I'm young, my legs were tired and we were walking around all day. So we sat down and then we go back later on that evening. We go to look for my sisters and we hear gunshots. All the sidewalks cleared and everybody is on the main street, because that's where the parade was, it was hosted on the street. Once we heard the gunshots we started to run.

We didn't realize that we were running towards them instead of running away from them. So we split hoping to meet back up, but I ended up getting shot. They ended up behind me, they saw me, and they stayed, screaming for help. That's all I remember until I woke up in the hospital.

Music…

I didn't feel comfortable going back to school because of my condition. When I got shot I was left with partial paralysis, so I wasn't comfortable being around normal people at the time because I felt like I was going to be looked at different. I ended up being homeschooled. It was what you would call depressing, but if I'm seven, I don't really know what depression is.

When we moved into the house we moved into, it came with a basketball court. My stepdad moved the basketball court to the front and I ended up learning how to play basketball with one hand and stuff like that. I began to get more comfortable just being around other kids. That's when I told my mom that I wanted to go back to school. It was saddening because I wanted to be the old me, but then you realize it makes you different, it makes you unique, and you stand out.

Patricia E. Kelly: I'm Patricia Kelly and I'm the President and CEO of Ebony Horsewomen. I'm also the Founder. I think I wanted to be a nurse. It's been so long ago I kind of forgotten, but I think I really wanted to be a nurse but God had other ideas.

As a child, my parents bought a home in a predominantly white neighborhood in the North End of Hartford and I lived next door to a gentleman who had a horse. Later on in life I found that my father had been a jockey, so I knew it was kind of like in my blood. So it worked well for us. Horses worked out our issues, helped us to manage our stresses, and manage our emotions. But it was about a year after formulating the Ebony Horsewomen that we learned that the kids were in worse shape than we were.

Tyler Johnson: Patricia Kelly and Ebony Horsewomen do more than teach young people to ride horses. Many of the children who come to their farm have suffered prior traumas and

face enormous barriers to success. Kelly was named a CNN Hero in 2015 for her work with these kids.

Patricia Kelly: So taking a riding lesson what you have to do is you have to hear the instructor. Many of our kids come here with about 10 seconds of focus time. That's education, so when they get to school, I'm listening to the teacher longer than I am before. I'm not daydreaming as much. The executive functioning is really kicking in. It begins to help control poor impulsive management, but you must follow the rules because if you can't follow them here, you will absolutely get into trouble out there – if not, get arrested or killed.

I believe in work. On a farm there's an awful lot of work and nobody gets a free lunch. Nobody gets a free lunch here. You wanna ride my horse, you 'gon do some work. And work is therapy. When they are working, using their bodies, sweating and getting tired they're not worried about somebody saying something bad about them on social media. They're not worried about having a fight, they're not worried about any of that. Work is therapy. It's important.

You know, the things that these black and brown children have to learn to survive kind of takes away their childhood a little bit. Just to put a pin in that story, we had a little girl here who had a lot of emotional problems. They bred chickens that spring. Thirty days later we had chicks and one of the chicks couldn't stand, but we kept him. Winter was coming and as that chick grew, he couldn't lift himself off of the ground and he was getting hypothermia from laying his chest on the ground; he couldn't put his chest up. With me being the administrator thinking, *well heck, I can feed a good chicken and a bad chicken, they 'gon cost me the same, so we'll euthanize him,* and she stopped me. She said, "Ms. Kelly, I have problems too, would you get rid of me?" We kept that chicken. He lived with rabbits for seven months until he died.

These kids see themselves in these animals. They understand that there are rules and regulations, but they also understand that we love them and that our sole mission is them. Therapy is no longer a luxury, it is an absolute need.

Abdul-Rahmaan Ibn Muhammad: Most of the times what we're doing is we're doing therapy but what I like to call it – they don't know it's therapy…

Tyler Johnson: Abdul-Rahmaan Ibn Muhammad is the Executive Director of My People Clinical Services. They provide therapeutic and crisis intervention support to families and children.

Abdul-Rahmaan I. Muhammad: …because if we said to them, "Come to my office so we can have a therapeutic talk about the fight you got into last week," they wouldn't come to my office. Literally I have that planned this week. I got a young person that I'm going to meet with and I'm going to say, "Hey man, let's go to lunch." Then at lunch while we're eating a sandwich, it gives him the opportunity to talk about what's going on.

I'm always thinking about how as social workers, we have to go to the community as opposed to expecting that they would come to us.

Iran Nazario: Well, my career started due to just a blessing, I say. A professor, Dr. Michael Borrero from the University of Connecticut, School of Social Work, was doing a study on disproportionate minority hiring when I was about 20 years young. I thought he was insulting me because I didn't understand what disproportionate minority hiring was.

Tyler Johnson: That's Iran Nazario of Peace Center of Connecticut. Earlier you heard him talk about growing up around violence, eventually joining a gang, and being in and out of prison.

Iran Nazario: He offered me $15 an hour – and when you offer someone who's on the streets, kind of broke and doing whatever to survive $15 an hour – it was so appealing that I listened to him. When I received the opportunity from UConn, I was still actually in the gang. I would go to UConn wearing my gang colors, then come back to the streets to fight and do whatever. So I was kind of like riding the fence and it was hard. That kind of started the process for me.

Going on three years ago, I founded the Peace Center of Connecticut. From a young man that didn't have much peace growing up until my 20's, I want to be able to build as much as I can.

We identify possible venues, events, or happenings in the community that may lead to gun violence or gang violence. We get called in by the City of Hartford Mayor's office and the police department to come up with strategies and ways that we can prevent gun violence from happening at these events. But we get the first crack at the young people or at the people in the community because our goal is not to have them arrested, but to diffuse it.

We target the young people that are involved in these groups and start talking to them, providing them resources, looking at what their needs are, and determining the best course of action to make sure that they understand that they can leave. There are many former gang members that are working as part of these teams. We can speak to the fact that you can get out, because there's a misnomer or misunderstanding that individuals can't exit gangs and that's not true. I know tons of guys that are out.

David Owens: Drugs are the root of a lot of crimes.

Tyler Johnson: David Owes is the court reporter for the Hartford Courant.

David Owens: Property crimes – burglars are stealing to get drugs for money – people are breaking into cars, and very often shootings and homicides are related to disputes over drug turf or something to do with drugs.

Mental health is another large component. A lot of the people I see in Superior Court are people who I would characterize as people who are hurting in some way. They're mentally ill, they are suffering from a drug addiction. I don't see a lot of evil people, if that makes sense. Most of the people who end up in court are just people who have made very bad mistakes, very bad decisions, or they're people who are suffering from an illness.

A very wise judge once told me that he could address a lot of the crime problems in Hartford by having instead of a jail, a drug treatment facility available, a place to send people who need help.

Tyler Johnson: Warren Hardy experienced the dangers of the drug epidemic firsthand.

Warren Hardy: I grew up on Earle Street. Earle Street, I would say, in the early 70s, up until the late 80s, was a pretty good street; everyone knew each other, there was a lot of support. But in the late 80s and early 90s when crack cocaine came out and it played a huge role in the lives of– not just people in that community, but people all over.

My mom ended up becoming addicted to drugs. This is a woman that loved me unconditionally, so once the drugs came into our household, it was like somebody hit a switch. I became a product of my environment because I started using marijuana and then in order for me to use it I had to sell drugs in order to get the drugs.

It's bigger than a specific community issue. There are systemic issues that continue to be maybe not so much as a direct cause, but more of an indirect cause to create some of the environments or situations that occur in a person's home or in their community. I take ownership. Regardless of the circumstances under which I grew up, which having two parents on drugs, family members on drugs, and my house was considered what some would say the trap house, the block, the crack house; my house was it. A lot of young people were watching me because I made stealing cars, selling drugs, gambling – all those negative things, I made them look really good.

The outcome is now those same young people are doing the same thing and their kids are doing the same thing, so I'm taking my responsibility serious.

Brian Foley: You know, something that impacted myself as a homicide detective is you'd get the call at night that there's been a shooting…

Tyler Johnson: Again, here's Brian Foley.

Brian Foley: We'd drive into the neighborhood and you'd start to see the police lights a block or so out. And the ambulance lights. You'd start to see the yellow tape. You'd walk into that crime scene and you'd see the evidence markers down. You'd see the body or the blood stains, or the car that's all shot up with the blood everywhere. You walk inside that yellow tape and crowds of people have gathered.

I took some time deliberately over my career to walk inside that yellow tape, turnaround and look back. What do I see on the other side of the yellow tape? You see families, you see kids playing like nothing's going on, like nothing's happening, and you cannot tell me that does not have an effect on a child whose brain is developing. If that happened in my neighborhood, you know, I'd be impacted by it. If it happened once, I'd be impacted by it for the rest of my life.

We, as in law enforcement, have tried so many different things with mass arrests, sweeping street corners, and you've seen these things not work. In fact, it probably keeps the areas that are impoverished to stay impoverished when you're pulling so many people out of the population, incarcerating them and then eliminating their opportunities when they come back in and it just creates a cycle.

So many of our shooters and so many of our shooting victims were previously incarcerated. I'd say in the 90th percentile.

Judy Dworin: My name is Judy Dworin and I am the Executive and Artistic Director of the Judy Dworin Performance Project.

Tyler Johnson: Judy Dworin works with incarcerated populations using art, dance, and performance as therapy.

I think it's really important to realize, for everybody to realize that 95% of the people who are incarcerated are coming back into the community. So we really need to think about incarceration as a preparation for that reentry and for a successful reentry, so we can stop the endless cycle of recidivism that we find happens.

I think that what these programs do is, first of all, they ground people in expressing themselves and thinking they are important enough to do that. They ask them to think deeply about who they are, what their choices are, what their choices have been, and what their choices can be, and that even if you have housing and a job and all those things, if you've lost yourself, then somewhere along the lines you're not going to necessarily make it.

I know one of the dads that we work with at Cybulski recently – and he had been in prison for a long time – and he said that in the 20 years that he'd been trying to connect with his daughters that them being able to see him take the risk of being, as he described it, "goofy," performing for them and expressing himself was like he said, the biggest step that he had made in connection with them in all of the 20 years that he had been in prison.

I can say, and I think everybody on my staff who works with this population and whatever aspect of it, it's been one of the most incredible learning experiences that I've ever had. I think we have to always remember that those who are incarcerated are not their mistake. They are people who are growing and becoming.

Many people who have been incarcerated have had a lot of time to think about what got them there and a lot of time to think about what they'd like to do. I think when we give them the opportunity to do that, we give them a chance to really give back and so many of the people that I work with, they want to do it right, they want to give back and we need to give them that chance because it's going to make our community a way better place.

Beth Hines: My name is Beth Hines. I'm the Executive Director for Community Partners in Action.

Tyler Johnson: Community Partners in Action operates the Reentry Welcome Center in downtown Hartford, which was funded by a grant from the Hartford Foundation. More than 2,000 people return to the Greater Hartford area from prison every year. Returning citizens who come to the Reentry Welcome Center need help with a number of supports, including food, clothing, housing, employment and more.

Beth Hines: To know what they've been through, to hear some of the stories, and then to watch the progress that they make with the help of our staff is amazing. People can change and we believe that.

I could speak to you from my heartstrings about why people deserve a second chance. Frankly, it's for the good of humanity. We all make mistakes. I can tell you there's been a lot of times I've said to myself, "But for the grace of God go I"… I feel that I could've gone in either direction at several points in my life. I had support, family and friends that made sure I didn't, a lot of the people we work with have nobody.

We had a fire at our Mart's House, which was our transitional home for women. We were able to thankfully, place them in one of our vacant buildings, but one thing that just was so heart wrenching, quite honestly was when several of the women said, "What am I going to do? You're all I have."

Brandon McGee: Were saying in the State of Connecticut: we are the state that's leading the charge with respect to the formerly incarcerated, we are the second chance state.

Tyler Johnson: Brandon McGee is a State Representative for the 5th Assembly District, which includes Windsor and Hartford. Brandon is an advocate for reentry and housing issues. Last year he hosted a listening tour to hear from returning citizens.

Brandon McGee: If you go out into the streets and you speak directly with our neighbors and friends who have experienced the criminal justice system, they'll tell you firsthand, "I ain't got a chance, never had a chance."

Many individuals with a criminal background, depending on the crime committed, many individuals don't even get an opportunity to apply to housing. But the major piece is the perception that many homeowners have when they have an individual with a particular background. "Oh my God, they're a criminal, we don't want them in our neighborhoods." So these individuals are wanting to reunite with their families only to have the doors shut in their face because of their criminal history of which they've spent time, they've redeemed themselves, they're home now and why are we still holding them hostage.

Tyler Johnson: This issue was personal for Brandon.

Brandon McGee: My dad, as far as I can remember – he passed away in 2007, and it was on the day of my college graduation. I remember his words. He said, "Brandon, I am not going to leave this Earth until I hear your voice and you say, I did it dad," and I promise you that is

exactly how it happened. I called him. I said, "This is it, I'm graduating." He couldn't say much because he was very sick but I heard him, "I'm proud of you son," and all that good stuff, and they told me an hour later had had passed away.

Just the other day I was cleaning out our basement and I found all of these letters that he had written me over the years as a young boy. This is what got me involved on this particular issue. I could remember, I can remember when he would apply for jobs only to get the runaround. It was because of his criminal history that he wasn't able to actually secure employment.

I understand the impact that it had on my family while my father was gone, but I also believe that the conversation is much bigger than just talking about formerly incarcerated. We've got to get back to addressing our education system. We have to again, providing quality opportunities for individuals that live in neighborhoods that have been overlooked and underrepresented.

Abdul-Rahmaan Ibn Muhammad: You and I may be able to say we need to have grit.

Tyler Johnson: Abdul-Rahmaan Ibn Muhammad of My People Clinical Services.

Abdul-Rahmaan Ibn Muhammad: …because when you start a game, if you have all of the tools to be successful in the game then you should be successful. But if you start the game and not only do you not have all the tools, but you also have all these other barriers popping up in your way – drugs, violence, no role model, poor education system all working against you, then the games are two different games. One person has all the tools, all the resources, everything they need and they have the map. It's like, this is what you've got to do to get through this game. I feel like if more leaders, if more non-leaders like people that…

That's our problem in our community is that the people that had all of the tricks, they don't give back. They just keep going on with their life and their life is great. Go look at their Facebook page, wonderful life. But the reality is if every person that actually has a little leg up went back and tried to help somebody out, I just feel like we could do a lot more.

Tyrek Marquez: At first it was just my mom. My mom would just like tell me we were going somewhere and then when I get there she would tell me like, "Oh you know you have to speak, right?"

Tyler Johnson: That's Tyrek Marquez. He's living proof that anyone can become a leader regardless of their age. Earlier you heard his story about being shot at age seven and falling into a depression. Tyrek rose from that awful situation to become an activist, speaking out to fellow teenagers about gun violence.

Tyrek Marquez: I was 11, I just wanted to be with my friends playing. I'd rather not go to an event at 4 o'clock in the evening and be around a bunch of adults talking about me getting shot. As I kept doing it, I started to like it because I realized that it's possible that I could make a major impact.

We started off just going to like community events and then after Newtown in 2014, Newtown, they extended an arm to us and for about 2-3 years, I started going to D.C. with them. We were going to like the Representatives' offices. The number one thing I'm really trying to push into the youth is just to lead by example. They've grown up around certain things like guns, gangs, and drugs. That's what they see, so when the get to a certain age, it's, "Okay, I'm gonna follow in these footsteps."

What I'm really trying to push is to lead by example. I'm still new at this. I just turned 18. I'm just becoming a young adult. Most of the time I like to listen. Some of the youth, they're head is already screwed on straight. They already know what's going on, they know exactly what to talk about and then there's others where they still have a certain kind of mindset that you're trying to get them out of. I can't reach millions of people all at once, but I can reach a kid at a time. If I change the way one kid thinks, then that kid could change how another kid thinks. It's a chain reaction.

Deborah Davis: It's not just individuals having access to guns, it's individuals having the right and the type of good education that they need to have and resources that they need to have. It's individuals having good mental health.

Tyler Johnson: Deborah Davis of Mothers United Against Violence.

Deborah Davis: So our job is to make sure that individuals know that yes, people are living in trauma. They're walking around in trauma. You may walk through the neighborhood and say, "Oh they look fine," but that person is not fine. So for me, community is having that same kind of protection, feeling like you belong, feeling like you can have the resources that you need to have in your community. It is love, it should be love. It should be hope.

In order to reduce crime and violence, and make our community safer, we need to address root causes such as poverty and education. We need to offer support and therapy for young people suffering from trauma. We need to foster better relationships between police and the communities they serve. We need to address our criminal justice system and the cycle of incarceration. Most importantly, we need to care about our neighbors.

We'll leave you with some thoughts from Iran Nazario of Peace Center of Connecticut.

Iran Nazario: Saint Francis did a survey and they asked a number of people, "What's the number one reason why there's violence in your community?" I believe it was 86% of them answered that they don't know their next door neighbor. What I want to be able to do is be able to have people say: I started to know my neighbor, I started to get to know my neighbor, and now I feel connected to that neighbor so I'm less prone to hurt that person.

My experience is that there are more successes here than there are failures. Just look at the numbers as a total. If you look at the population of young people that are in Hartford and you hear unfortunately of 25/26 murders or 100 shootings or whatever it is – 100 shots fired. Think

about all those others kids that are not shooting. Think about all those kids that are struggling through all of that, that still are graduating high school, and still are going to college.

I haven't met one kid in my entire career, and that's a long time, that has told me I can't wait to die out here on these streets, I can't wait to be shot. There's no kid here that wants that. The odds are stacked against you. There's a great need for more adult involvement and not just from the purse or the wallet, I'm talking about physically being out there so these young people can believe that adults still believe in them.

I think I am here for a reason. I was shot. I've been stabbed. My brother was murdered here. I lost 17 friends in one year. To be so close to that, something needed me here and I believe my purpose is clear now.

Background music…

My purpose is to bring as much peace, unity, love and compassion to the community as I can. I bought into that. If I was a bass and you were a fisherman, you'd have me on a hook, my friend. I'm hooked to peace. I'm hooked to it because I've seen the positive impact that it can have.

Tyler Johnson: Thanks for listening to DISINVESTED. I'm Tyler Johnson.

If you enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and share with your friends.

In our next episode, we'll talk about Workforce Development and Skill Attainment.

A number of people in our region face barriers to employment that prevent them from reaching their full potential. How do we help people find not just jobs, but careers? Tune in next week.

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