

ALUMNI

Taking It to the Streets

Teny Gross teaches kids nonviolence.



This fall, gunmen on foot shot a six-year-old boy, reportedly while aiming for his mother's girlfriend because she was in a rival project—an accident racked up to “the cost of the game,” David says. “I tell them, ‘You’re willing to go down for something that doesn’t even belong to you—a building made of bricks, and land

Teny Gross (left) and colleague Sal Montiero with youths at Kennedy Plaza, in downtown Providence, where some 2,000 students switch school buses

owned by the government—nothing you can even pass on to your kids. Why would you do that? Does that make sense? But it

gives them a sense of purpose when there is nothing for these kids to do. If it were not for Teny and the institute, there would be no role models or people to help kids like I was.”

Gross is a philosophically minded, long-time street worker himself. During the 1990s anti-violence campaign known as the Boston Miracle, he was active in the Dorchester neighborhood, doing community outreach, gang mediation, job creation, and skills training. He also taught kids to document their lives with photography. Building partnerships—with the police, for example, despite local animosities—is a particular strength.

Being a former Israeli Army sergeant helps. “I’ve been both a victim of violence through [the legacy of] the Holocaust and then was top dog when it came to the Palestinians. I’m part of the weak and part of the strong; that’s a very humbling experience,” says Gross, who moved to Boston to be near his sister in 1989. “I always see things through the eyes of the kids *and* through the eyes of the police. Keeping those tensions in your head—some people would say that is what makes you good at this kind of work.”

The institute where he works now was

DAVID C. grew up in Providence, Rhode Island. With no father around and a drug-addicted mother, he moved through foster homes, gathering a fragile sense of worth from a gang of friends. “All I aspired to was being important on the street,” he says. “There was nothing about a future.” He spent five years in juvenile detention and a few in prison, and still has a reputation among local cops for living up to his nickname, “Devious,” for once escaping through the police-station roof.

At 37, he is still hanging out with the kids—in the schools, at their homes, the hospital, or the mall. But as a street worker with the city’s Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence, he now prevents the very violence he once provoked.

Like David, most of the street workers are ex-gang members or former local criminals, says Teny Oded Gross, M.T.S.

’01, the institute’s founding executive director. Their backgrounds make them uniquely suited for what it takes to thwart a single act of violence: hours of face-to-face counseling of kids during their most heated, impulsive moments—when they might otherwise pull out a gun and do irreversible damage. “My job is not pretty—it’s not sending kids to Harvard, or anything fancy,” Gross explains. “It’s about keeping kids in this city alive between the ages of 14 and 23.”

The kids are even willing to die for their housing projects. “These beefs are territorial, not ethnic or racial,” David explains on a drive through the darkened streets to visit kids at the Chad Brown Housing Development. A group of teenagers eyes the passing car. “They look at every occupant, every car,” he says. “If you see one slow down with people inside wearing hoods, then you worry. That makes your hair stand on end.”

established in 2001 by Father Ray Malm and Sister Ann Keefe, the pastoral team at St. Michael's Church, in the poor neighborhood of South Providence. Catalyzed by growing youth violence and the death of 15-year-old Jennifer Rivera—shot in the head in front of her house to prevent her from testifying in a pending murder case—they drafted a broad mission: “To teach by word and example the principles of nonviolence and to foster a community that addresses potentially violent situations with nonviolent solutions” based on the work of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Gross has built the nonprofit organization from a few unpaid nonviolence trainers into a \$1.2-million agency with a 28-member team. By the end of the year, he plans to open a four-story headquarters in St. Michael's vacant convent, with tutors, a gym, art and theater classes, and plenty of musical outlets—including a sound- and video-recording studio—thanks to \$4.5 million in contributions from private donors, foundations, the city, and the state. “We're really good at going in and intervening,” Gross says, “but to do the work of really transforming someone takes a longer time. This building will focus on youth development.” Besides running the street crew, institute staff members operate a nonviolence training program (Gross has worked with young people from as far away as Belfast and Guatemala) and a victims' support center; they also mediate conflicts in families and schools and coordinate a summer-jobs program.

“Teny is the single most important partnership we have to fight crime and violence,” says Providence police chief Dean M. Esserman, a former prosecutor and Dartmouth graduate. “Everywhere I go—to every shooting, the ER, in the classrooms, to every wake, to every funeral—I see Teny, even if it's two o'clock in the morning. He and the street workers are about building sustained relationships of trust. The kids know that they love them—they don't get that from many adults.”

With a diverse population of 175,000, Providence is a small city in a tiny state. But it has the third-highest child-poverty rate in America (tied with New Orleans);

more than half the city's public-school children qualify for free lunches. Moreover, the state topped the nation for unemployment this fall, with an 8.8 percent rate, and reported a record number of home foreclosures. “We are two cities—one of wealth and one of poverty,” Gross says, “and they rarely meet.” Violence, he asserts, is sparked by environmental, not biological, factors: “In my mind it's very clear: There is not a lot of opportunity—economic or otherwise—and these kids see failure all around them all the time. It's traumatizing. They feel pushed into a corner and sometimes violence is the only way they feel they have some control over their lives.”

Violent crime in Providence fell overall between 2002 and 2007; Esserman attributes that to community policing, increased accountability—and the work of the institute. The hottest spot is in the West End, where most of the city's 40 gangs (with their estimated 1,600 members) stake out their claims among the largest concentration of poor and minority families. “The problem is not all gangs—that is just the *People* magazine view,” cautions Esserman. “The problem is that the new drug in American culture is violence. Our children are growing up with it all around them—the media, the video arcade, in their neighborhoods. Their homes are not sanctuaries.” With the economy spiraling downward, Gross worries about the coming year. “Every day we see people just out of jail, trying to get out of gangs, and it's extremely desperate for them to even find work,” he says. “We've got our finger in the dike now, but the pressure could be too much.”

GANGS AREN'T THE SOLE FOCUS. Plenty of kids need helping staying in school and coping with family troubles. One night in November, a mother came to the institute

with her 12-year-old son, who was being bullied by his older half-brother—recently returned from the Dominican Republic and on the cusp of joining a gang. As she met privately with David, Gross talked to the boy about cartoons and art, and they went through a book of photographs of Rhode Island's civic and community leaders. “He's hungry for this kind of interaction; he's very sensitive,” Gross says later. “He would probably do well in a middle-class, artistic life. But he's being harassed, and if you fail to protect him the way adults are supposed to, he could become very tough very quickly.” (Gross has since contacted the chairman of the board of the community art center to get the boy into some classes.)

He believes in the redemptive powers of art and culture. Just as Gross used to ferry Boston youth to hockey games, then over to Harvard Square's bookstores and cafés,



Gross with street worker Dimky Edouard at an informal session with gang members

now David routinely takes his charges to museums, concerts, and to Brown University events. Often, a simple jaunt to suburbia “can be a revelation for these kids,” says David. “I like to show them how people can get along and shop in stores and feel free and happy without looking over their shoulders and worrying about getting shot at. To the kids, this life is like TV.” Adds Gross, “Becoming middle class and learning just takes thousands of interactions. It's all about exposure.”

GROSS'S HOME is filled with etchings, paintings, and sculptures from his family,

friends, and wife, Julia Clinker, a photographer who teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design and takes primary care of their two young sons. It was while earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Tufts and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1990 that Gross, who had plans "to photograph how the police treated people," first met Boston community activist Reverend Eugene F. Rivers III '83; he ended up teaching art to kids through the Azusa Christian Community (begun as a Harvard student group in the 1980s), where Rivers was pastor, and its affiliated Ella J. Baker House, which serves high-risk families in Dorchester. During the next decade, he was based primarily at Baker House as a teacher, street worker, and community organizer.

The work was faith-based, but "whether you believe in God or not was (and is) not critical," says Gross, who is basically agnostic after years of studying religion.

"I believe that people are capable of living up to their potential if given love and attention and opportunities. I connect with the communities of faith because they are dedicated around principles that I agree with—that every human life is worth something and worth doing something about."

Divinity School "was a great place for me to ask new questions; I'm a much more lethal debater thanks to Harvard," he says. He was especially drawn to professors Harvey Cox and Kevin Madigan and former faculty member Father J. Bryan Hehir. He took "Justice" with Bass professor of government Michael Sandel and still listens to the lectures through his iPod while jogging. "Harvard was a respite from the streets," he continues, "and it renewed me to come and do this": move to Providence (where his wife grew up) and take on the job of building up the nascent institute.

Gross's own religious background is complicated. His mother, a Serb, deplored organized religion. His father, a Croatian Jew, once aspired to become a Catholic priest largely because he was hidden in a monastery during World War II (his mother died in the Holocaust); his eventual move to Israel was to be near his sole remaining relative, a sister. "My father's the one who taught me all about Jesus," Gross says. "It was not an observant Jewish household; we also celebrated Christmas. But in Israel, you begin to absorb the culture and I did. I still love the slowing down on Fridays. I really miss that."

Though far from being a violent young man, Gross says he has always tended to "question everything" and was somewhat rebellious. He recalls breaking a window, slapping a teacher, throwing a kid over a table—"typical, aggressive kid stuff"—and says fighting at school and on the

Anthony Woods: Taking a Stand

When Anthony C. Woods, M.P.P. '08, delivered the graduate English address at Commencement last June (shown at right), he had just made a momentous decision: to publicly acknowledge his homosexuality and effectively end a military career that had spanned nine years and two tours in Iraq.

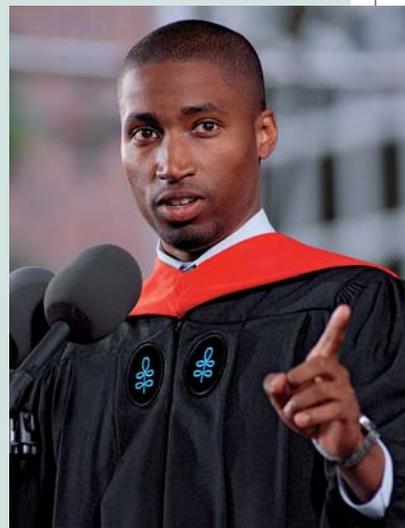
Woods did not mention this decision in his speech. Soon after, though, the West Point graduate and U.S. Army captain informed his commander that he was gay, initiating his dismissal under the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. In early November, Woods learned he would be "eliminated" from the army on the grounds of "moral and professional dereliction" and required to repay \$35,000—the amount of his scholarship to attend the Kennedy School.

A military career may seem a curious choice for a young man who is gay or even questioning his orientation. But for the son of a single mother, growing up in an Air Force town in northern California, acceptance to West Point was an honor—and an opportunity—beyond compare. Woods focused on the professional to the exclusion of the personal; with the country at war, that wasn't hard. But two years at Harvard gave him space to think—and to face his dismal prospects for upward mobility in an organization with an explicit homosexuality ban and a strong culture of marriage and children. Even if he had stayed closeted, he says, "It wasn't going to be possible for me to fit the mold, and I knew that because of that, there was going to be a glass ceiling."

Even after the invasive court-martial process—the military conducts interviews with friends and family to verify homosexuality, presumably to prevent fraud, for instance by soldiers who wish to avoid an additional tour in Iraq—Woods is reluctant to malign the officers who carried out his investigation. He says they are simply implementing a policy. Change might come from Congress, but Woods believes the Supreme Court is a more likely venue: "I think it's going to take a landmark court case, like *Brown v. Board of Education*."

As recently as a year ago, Woods thought life after Harvard would include at least five more years of military service. He had been accepted to teach at West Point—"a huge, huge dream," he says. Now, even as he waits to hear whether his discharge will be honorable or dishonorable, Woods has begun a new chapter: while working as staff secretary to New York governor David Paterson, he is applying to law school. He dreams of a role in changing the policy that cut his own dreams short. But his decision to come out already constitutes a significant first step. "If this policy's ever going to go away," he says, "they have to lose talented people. It's not going to go away unless it hurts."

~ ELIZABETH GUDRAIS



STU ROSNER

playground was the norm. “In the U.S. now, these juvenile actions would have resulted in a criminal record,” he adds. “But I was also full of life and was interested in philosophy and ethics and the world. I read literature and studied in school.”

Childhood, he thinks, should be about making mistakes, and about adults helping you learn. Tightening the grip of authority rarely helps. “The British got tough on the Irish—and you got a rebellion. We got tough on the Palestinians and we got a rebellion,” he asserts. “You put someone to the wall and usually they will have to act back.”

Violence and aggression are inherently exciting, he notes, especially to young men. He recalls driving a van-load of Boston kids home once: they saw their enemies out the window and “It was like a battalion reaction—they got all excited and started talking about who they were and what they did, and how they were going to get them,” he reports. “These crews challenge each other like military units. They have their enemies and their friends, their fights, and their girlfriends, and the drugs and the drinking—it’s these same things that excite people all around the world.”

In such an environment, how does nonviolence compete? Gross mentions the case of one 19-year-old in Providence, “VA,” a suspected murderer assigned to David. VA’s mother is in federal prison on drug charges and his best friend was ambushed and killed last summer while sneaking up on a rival crew. “VA is a real leader,” Gross points out. “What would he be if he’d grown up in an affluent suburb? A jock, a star athlete, captain of the team. The kids who go to Harvard are not

A Special Notice Regarding Commencement Exercises

Thursday, June 4, 2009

Morning Exercises

To accommodate the increasing number of those wishing to attend Harvard’s Commencement Exercises, the following guidelines are proposed to facilitate admission into Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement Morning:

- Degree candidates will receive a limited number of tickets to Commencement. Parents and guests of degree candidates must have tickets, which they will be required to show at the gates in order to enter Tercentenary Theatre. Seating capacity is limited; however, there is standing room on the Widener steps and at the rear and sides of the Theatre for viewing the exercises.

Note: A ticket allows admission into the Theatre, but does not guarantee a seat. The sale of Commencement tickets is prohibited.

- Alumni/ae attending their major reunions (25th, 35th, 50th) will receive tickets at their reunions. Alumni/ae in classes beyond the 50th may obtain tickets from the Classes and Reunions Office, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge.

- For alumni/ae from non-major reunion years and their spouses, there is televised viewing of the Morning Exercises in the Science Center and at designated locations in most of the undergraduate Houses and professional schools. These locations provide ample seating, and tickets are not required.

- A very limited supply of tickets will be made available to all other alumni/ae on a first-come, first-served basis through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

Afternoon Exercises

The Harvard Alumni Association’s Annual Meeting convenes in Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement afternoon. All alumni and alumnae, faculty, students, parents, and guests are invited to attend and hear Harvard’s President and the Commencement Speaker deliver their addresses. Tickets for the afternoon ceremony will be available through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

~ Jacqueline A. O’Neill, University Marshal

passive wimps—they’re very aggressive, very driven.”

But for street kids, he says, that sense of power too often “comes through mowing people down with an Uzi. I think what we’re pushing for is a more evolved form of aggression.” ~ NELL PORTER BROWN

Comings and Goings

UNIVERSITY CLUBS offer a variety of social and intellectual events, including Harvard-affiliated speakers (please see the partial list below). For further information, contact the club directly, call the HAA at 617-495-3070 or 800-654-6494, e-mail clubs@harvard.edu, or visit www.haa.harvard.edu.

On January 12, the Harvard Club of San Diego hosts the Reverend Peter Gomes, Plummer professor of Christian

morals, who talks about “Nearly 40 Years On: A View From the Memorial Church.”

On January 29, at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, visiting Harvard professors discuss “What Might We Know: Science in the Next 20 Years.” University provost Steven E. Hyman will moderate the discussion of such topics as stem-cell research, global health, and energy and the environment. Panelists will include professor of surgery and neurology Jeffrey D. Macklis, earth and planetary sciences professor Daniel P. Schrag, and Strong professor of infectious disease Dyann F. Wirth. The event is organized by Kat Taylor ’80 and the Harvard Alumni Association, along with the Harvard clubs of San Francisco and Silicon Valley. (Registration through the HAA is required.)

On February 5, the Harvard Club of Broward County welcomes Timothy Colton, Feldberg professor of government and Russian studies and director of the Russian Research Center, for a discussion on “How to Deal with a Resurgent Russia.” And McKay professor of computer science Harry Lewis talks about “Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness after the Digital Explosion” for the Harvard Club of Maryland on February 28.

A Record-Breaker Passes

Walter Seward, LL.B. ’24, who died on September 14, a month shy of his 112th birthday, was the longest-lived Harvard alumnus known to University records. He practiced law into his nineties; for his final visit to the Law School, in 2004, Dean Elena Kagan declared Walter Seward Day in his honor (see “The Oldest Ever?” January-February 2006, page 79, for further details.)