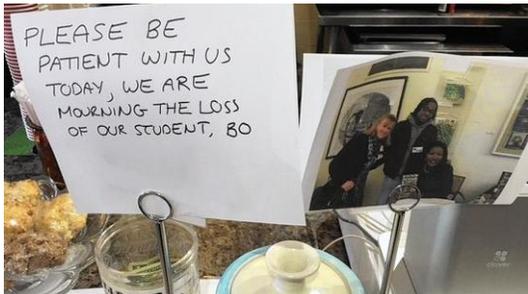


Dear Evanston: Project uses social media to address violence 'close to home'



Members of Curt's Cafe in Evanston mourned the loss of one of their students last month. (Curt's Cafe / Handout)

Lee V. Gaines, freelance reporter for Pioneer Press

Pioneer Press

FEBRUARY 14, 2016, 1:42pm

A half-dozen Evanston community members recently launched a social media campaign to drive awareness of violence in the city, provide a platform for those affected by it and hopefully drum up some solutions to the problem, according to the campaign's organizers.

The project, dubbed "Dear Evanston," is a multi-platform campaign with its own website and accounts on Facebook, [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). Evanstonians "from all walks of life" are invited to post "imagery, art, use their words, post videos in any way they want about how they're feeling about violence in Evanston and what they think solutions might be and what they think leaders in Evanston could be doing," said Juliet Bond, one of six people working on the project.

The campaign was organized as a part of Leadership Evanston, a nine-month program created by the Evanston Community Foundation that gathers together active community members to tackle a host of issues of concern to the city's residents, Bond said.

Amy Monday, development officer for the Evanston Community Foundation and a member of the Dear Evanston team, said the group was tasked with developing a project around violence and safety because all six group members expressed a keen interest in the topic. Bond emphasizes that while Leadership Evanston assigned the topic, the project itself was born entirely out of discussions and brainstorming by Dear Evanston team members.

Bond, who serves as director of a nonprofit called Caring Outreach by Parents in Evanston (COPE), said she's heard gunshots outside the building where she works at the corner of Dewey Avenue and Foster Street. The violence in the city, is "literally close to home," she said.

Bond, who says she's close to individuals involved with Curt's Cafe, an organization that provides life and food service skills training to at-risk youth in the city, said news several weeks ago of the murder of one of the program's participants, Benjamin "Bo" Mandujano-Bradford, highlights the "heartbreaking" consequences of violence in the city.



Curt's Cafe members mourn student killed in Evanston shooting. Jan. 21, 2016. (WGN-TV)

Curt's Cafe South plugged the Dear Evanston campaign on their Facebook page shortly after the project launched asking friends to "add your stories about how violence in Evanston has affected you and what each of us can do to stop it."

"We work with kids—a lot of kids—coming out the justice system and a lot have been in violent situations or are part of violent situations," said Curt's Cafe executive director, Susan Trieschmann. "I'd say 98 percent are motivated or affected by the violence --

that's who we serve so if we can't get rid of the violence we can't do our job very well."

Communications coordinator for Evanston police, Perry Polinski, wrote in an email that the department has stepped up efforts to reduce violence in the city, including a violence reduction initiative launched last year and increased police officer visibility, though he says "the police cannot be everywhere all of the time" and they rely on victim cooperation and on residents to come forward with relevant information.

Polinski said he's not familiar with the "Dear Evanston" campaign, but wrote that, "anything that heightens awareness, encourages involvement, and creates conversation regarding personal safety is a help."

Police have said that some of the violence in Evanston has been triggered by posts on social media. Bond said her group is aware of the role social media has played in these incidents, and because of that, posts on all of "Dear Evanston" platforms will be monitored closely to ensure any "inflammatory" comments are either filtered or removed immediately.

Monday said she doesn't think the burden of addressing violence in the city should fall solely on the shoulders of its police force.

"That's our goal for this campaign, to have people

realize the police cannot take care of it—it's much deeper—and putting more people in jail has not been the answer," she said.

A selection of the comments, photos, art and videos received through the project will be incorporated into a slideshow and displayed at the Evanston Arts Center alongside a host of other community-based performances and discussions as part of Piven Theatre Workshop's production of "Dead Man Walking," a play by Tim Robbins that was adapted from a best-selling book about capital punishment, Bond said. The production will run from April 16 through May 15, according to Piven's website.

Monday said the results of other Evanston Leadership projects, which focus on affordable housing, accessible mental health treatment, diversity and equity and youth employment and training, will also be presented in May.

She said the Dear Evanston team is reaching out to schools, elected officials and other prominent members of the community to get the word out about the project and hopefully find a way to continue it beyond this spring.

In addition to coming up with solutions to the violence, Monday said she also hopes this project will increase awareness among residents of Evanston who do not live in areas typically plagued by violent crime.

"Personally, I want Evanston residents to realize this is a problem that affects everyone and doesn't just happen over there, and that it takes everyone to address the problem," she said.