

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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Wednesday, May 4, 2016

'Dear Evanston' Project Looks at Youth Violence

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"Dear Evanston," the project of one group in the most recent Leadership Evanston class, is a Facebook page with posts from Evanston residents about racial equity and youth violence in this eight-square-mile community.

Members of the group are Juliet Bond, Mitchell Smith, Teeneka Jones-Gueye, Nick Gehl, Amy Monday, and Nina Gavin.

Ms. Gavin, who administers the #Dearevanston page, describes the winnowing down of the given topic, "violence," to a set of interviews instantly accessible via social media.

"We were given the topic of violence and safety. We started with violence and thought that youth violence has been so much present in Evanston," Ms. Gavin said.

Realizing none of them was an expert in youth violence, the group looked first to the arts, then to postcards before settling on communicating through social media. One idea was to take the guns recovered by the police and have them melted down and let Evanston Township High School arts students create a sculpture, but the Evanston Police Department did not like the idea of turning guns over to high school students, Ms. Gavin said. A second idea was to leave postcards at various places throughout the town for people to fill out with their thoughts and experiences about youth violence and return them to the group, Ms. Gavin said.

Ms. Bond and Ms. Gavin conducted several interviews with civic and youth leaders and local activists. Emeric Mazibuko, an Outreach Case Manager with Youth & Opportunity United (Y.O.U.); Kevin Brown, Youth and Young Adult Program Manager for the City; Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl; Ninth Ward Alderman Brian Miller; Robin Simmons; Karen Singer; and Tamara Stewart Hadaway, founder of Kings-way Preparatory School, a faith-based school operating in the Family Focus building, are among the many interviewed for Dear Evanston.

The Facebook page is now filled with those and other interviews, stories of the black community, historic and present-day photos, comments about what is going on in the community, and sadly, reflections on funerals. Many causes have been suggested, Ms. Gavin says: lack of economic opportunity, a history of racism, unmet mental health needs, and the hip-hop culture, with its emphasis on easy money, material wealth, women, and access to guns.



Nina Gavin, administer of the #Dearevanston Facebook page

The project is scheduled to end this month, as the Leadership Evanston class graduates, but Ms. Karin says she would like to continue and expand the project. “The more people I talk to, the more I learn about the causes of youth violence. As Dear Evanston moves forward, one of the most important things we hope to do is involve the young men who live with violence in their lives – and their families: the people that youth violence directly affects. We hope to work with them to hear their thoughts and about why it happens and their ideas about how we can work to reduce it.”

What began as a short-term social media project appears to be evolving into a lengthy love letter to the community.

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