

Barbershop Interventions – Reaching out to Young Men

By Cary Betagole

In a unique program conceived and initiated by Neighborhoods United Against Drugs here in southwest, local community leader Joe Purnell, Dr. Sylvia Briscoe and the NUAD team are reaching out with a strong and authoritative message on anti-violence and productive lifestyles to young men through the sacred and secure inner city institution - the local barbershop.

The program features a dramatic video entitled "Choices Two" in which three local leaders share their fascinating stories which start with the all-too-common reckless youth and eventual incarceration, but also witness a turnaround and dramatic change to productive, positive lives of service.

The programs initiated by NUAD involve showing of the video in popular local barbershops, followed by a discussion of the key issues, and so far these events have proved to be a means spiritual self-examination for the young participants.

The program is aimed at moving beyond just conversation to address the culture of violence among young black men in the Southwest (and beyond). Purnell hopes to not only raise awareness, but also to begin to change behaviors.

"If us older guys had an answer, we wouldn't have an issue. We're all looking for answers together," said Purnell. "How many times do you see a so-called 'expert' come in and tell folks what to do? What makes them an expert?"

Purnell moderates the seven stage



A local Philadelphia barbershop hosts a discussion session on key issues faced by young men through a unique program entitled "Choice Two," initiated by Southwest's Neighborhoods United Against Drugs.

solve the problem.

"I'm a participant and I have a responsibility to move the conversation forward. I need to know my opinion is no more important than anyone else's," said Purnell. "For example, one group may decide through talking that a central issue in their past was getting to school, so they would work on a program to get kids to school."

The group self-examination stage usually leads the men to a point of radical acceptance of their situations, to quit the 'blame game. In one particularly moving case, a participant recalls a story in which his estranged father did not recognize him on the street.

"I had to accept that he didn't want a relationship, so I moved on to focus on my wife & kids," the participant recalled.

The initial Barbershop Interventions have been held at Philly's Finest at 6122 Market

Street, but Purnell wants to expand the program across the city and eventually across the country. He says there are 10 barbers across the city interested in facilitating Interventions, and Dr. Briscoe will be training these barbers on how to moderate the discussion.

Purnell said this grassroots approach is the most effective way to gain trust in the community. "Universities and big institutions can't come into a barbershop like this and get guys to open up. They don't trust them. This is the value that small groups like ours bring," he said.

The program has received support from several sources, including The Pollination Foundation, Wayne Presbyterian Church, and Brown Family ShopRite Superstores.

The lesson is for academic institutions to find the Joe Purnell's of the world to partner with at the grassroots. "They have the resources, but we have the means," he said.