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Emerging leaders: College of Saint Benedict Reeves tackles the issue of violence rather than running from it



IN THE GANG-INFESTED SOUTH MINNEAPOLIS NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE JOAL REEVES GREW UP, A DIFFERENT KIND OF WAR CLAIMED TOO MANY YOUNG LIVES.

BY KIRSTI MAROHN • KMAROHN@STCLOUDTIMES.COM • DECEMBER 26, 2008

Joal Reeves is a survivor of war.

It might not have been a bloody civil conflict like the one her parents escaped when they fled West Africa when she was a baby.

But in the gang-infested south Minneapolis neighborhood where Reeves grew up, a different kind of war claimed too many young lives and left residents living in fear.

Now, the 21-year-old senior at the College of St. Benedict is fighting back by working to bring peace and hope to her old neighborhood and others stricken by gang violence.

Reeves has made a name for herself on campus by writing and speaking publicly about her own experiences and views on gang violence. Last year, she earned a scholarship and used the money to create a youth program in south Minneapolis, giving at-risk teens a creative outlet and a chance to express themselves.

Not only has her work gained her recognition and a sense of purpose, it's also fostered a deeper understanding of what her parents experienced in their native Liberia.

"I felt there was a link between what I was going through as a teenager and a child in Minneapolis and hearing gunshots and having people die around me," she said. "The trauma that was affecting me was the same type of trauma that was affecting them.

"We understand it's the violence that can impact people, and kind of shape them for the rest of their lives. It's something that needs to be dealt with."

Close to home

Reeves' parents settled in Minneapolis' Central neighborhood, the territory of a gang known as the Rolling 30s Bloods. At the bus stop, Reeves waited with gang members who knew she wasn't one of them.

"The way I had to interact with them just for fear of being safe — it bothered me a lot," Reeves said.

At Roosevelt High School, there were gang-related fights and worries about who was going to be shot. One day, Reeves saw a friend reading a newspaper in the hallway. She glanced at the page and saw the photo of a former classmate who had been killed.

"I just broke down in tears right there," she said. "And I think it was more than just I knew this person. It was like, 'This could happen to me.' And I started to really take it personal when before I was kind of detached from it."

Reeves no longer felt she could stay safe simply by getting good grades and staying away from the wrong people.

"It had just shocked me that the victims and the suspects are people that look like me, people that act like me. ... This problem is not just kept to those who decide to be in the gang. It affects everybody."

The stress was building up, and Reeves talked to a social worker at school. Instead of offering sympathy, the social worker posed a question.

What are you going to do about it?

"It started building something up for me, a mentality that was more of an action, of this is not where it ends," Reeves said. "You don't just cry, you do something. And I started thinking of ways that I could impact the problem of gang violence."

So for her high school film class, Reeves took to the streets armed with a camera to make a documentary about her neighborhood, interviewing police and residents.

Her parents were understandably a bit nervous, but also supportive. Reeves' mother is a teacher and social worker, her father a pastor and social activist.

"They're really believers in social justice, so it wasn't really hard to convince them that the issue needed my response and I was a good person to do it, but they were kind of worried for their daughter," Reeves said.

As graduation neared, Reeves planned to attend college in another state, but a visit to St. Ben's in St. Joseph changed her mind. She thought it felt welcoming and would be a good place to focus.

So Reeves found herself in a small private college surrounded by classmates who didn't grow up in large cities where gangs are prevalent. Reeves took it as a challenge and spoke about gang violence in her public speaking class.

"Everybody else was like, 'Well, I want to talk about something that's nice and pretty,' " she said. "I was like, 'No, this is serious, and this is an issue.' Having to sell that to them — really, I think it strengthened the way that I talk about it."

Reeves had intended to major in communications. But a first-year symposium class with Kelly Kraemer, an associate professor of peace studies who became her adviser, changed her mind. The study of peace seemed the best way to address the war of the streets.

"When I'm looking at it as war, I'm looking at it more as something that impacts people mentally as well as physically," Reeves said. "I don't think the homicide rates are what indicate what impact gang violence has. I think it's really what happens to people mentally that is the biggest loss, because I think that's something that recurs over time. "

Reeves dove into sociology, political science and psychology classes and began to talk about gang violence every chance she got in the classroom.

"I don't care if it's theology. I'm like, 'How does God feel about gang violence?'" she said with a laugh. "When (students) don't know about gang violence, I think it's a problem. ... Now they just can't say they don't know about it."

Reeves is a leader on campus, and other students like and respect her although she's not shy about disagreeing on issues, Kraemer said. She called Reeves a gifted speaker whose confidence and natural leadership ability are "rare, but exciting to find in a student."

Most of the students Kraemer advises need nudging along.

"With Joal, I've always felt that I'm running behind her, trying to keep up," she said.

Offering hope

In her junior year, Reeves found out she was one of six Minnesota students to receive the Jay and Rose Phillips Scholarship, which aims to address an unmet community need.

Reeves saw a chance to help the teens in her old south Minneapolis neighborhood. While there were plenty of programs for children, many adults were afraid to work with older youths, she said.

“Where some people thought that was something to be feared, I kind of took it as the biggest challenge ... working with those people that could be involved in the gang, that are most likely to be the victims of that violence,” Reeves said.

So Reeves created the South Side Renaissance Project for youth ages 13-19. It was modeled after the Harlem Renaissance — a 1920s African-American art and cultural movement in New York City. It was also a chance for Reeves to tap into her own passion for art, which had frequently been her refuge during childhood.

Reeves partnered with Horizons Youth Program, an after-school program for younger children. At around 4:30 p.m., Reeves’ teens would show up. She engaged them in different popular art forms — hip-hop music, spoken word poetry, fashion.

The final project was modeled after the reality TV show “Project Runway.” The teens built their own mannequins, designed the clothes, cut out fabric and sewed.

Perhaps more important were the group discussions, which addressed gang violence but many other topics as well.

“I wanted them to look at their life as a whole and say, ‘Well, what’s wrong in my life and what’s good in my life?’”

A pivotal moment came when a teen who worked at the center was shot and injured. Reeves stopped the usual activities to give the teens a chance to talk about it. Some wanted to scream and yell.

“They were really fed up with that type of violence impacting them and ... coming closer and closer to them and their friends and people they knew,” Reeves said.

Reeves tried not to lecture, instead sharing her own experiences and choices she’d made.

“I talk like they talk. I interact how they usually interact,” she said. “I just have a different view of the problem, and I have a more positive outlook on my life. I’m actually making decisions that are making my life a more positive experience.”

Many of the teens had little hope or ambition because they had grown up in a culture of violence, Reeves said. Many have a warped perception of what it is to be a man, believing that violence is how one gains a reputation and respect, she said.

And with poverty and unemployment rampant, they believed they had few other options, Reeves said. Many had no goals other than to buy nice clothes or a car.

"I'm like, 'OK, where are you driving to? Do you have a house to live in? Do you have kids? Do you have a family?'" she said. "I began to see people really having no real hopes for the future, but more just, 'OK, what can I get now because I'm probably not going to be here too long.' "

Reeves tried to offer the teens hope for the future, so they would start to value themselves and be accountable to their loved ones. "When people see a future for themselves, they make decisions that really are geared toward achieving that," she said.

Looking ahead

After graduation this spring, Reeves hopes to join Teach for America, which recruits recent college graduates to teach for two years in schools in low-income communities throughout the United States.

Teaching will allow her to tackle the problem of gang violence through education in a larger city such as Atlanta or Chicago, she said.

Still, Reeves isn't planning to abandon her old neighborhood. Her dream is to start a large nonprofit in south Minneapolis that would bring many different organizations together to prevent gang violence.

Reeves credits two people for keeping her grounded and helping her not forget her roots. Her older brother is a musician whose passion for life has inspired Reeves to want a life doing something she loves. And her best friend from high school repeatedly reminds her not to forget where she came from. "The problems don't stop, so who's going to do something about it?" Reeves asked. "I want to be a person who does something about it. ... This is where I really want to make a difference."