

Loss of Officer Brown – Crime is not the Answer

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In the aftermath of the shooting of St. Louis Police Officer Norvelle T. Brown, I saw a movement that transcended race, creed and economic status. For a moment in time, there were police and civilians of every color, status and station of life joining together to mourn the loss of a great officer. Many were at a loss for words regarding the senseless violence and moral depravity that would cause a 15-year old to kill an African American policeman who was a pillar of this community. Much can be said about the lack of manpower that caused the slain officer to respond to a call without backup. Much can also be said about the 18-year-old who gave the gun to the underage would-be killer for “protection.”

I believe that now is the time for all African Americans in this community to stand up and call for an end to black youth crimes in the St. Louis area. For it was for this ideal that Officer Brown gave his life. As you may know, he asked to work in his own neighborhood because he wanted to make a difference. Ironically, Brown was interested in keeping black youths off the streets and showing them that there was a better way to become successful without committing crime. Unfortunately, that message fell on the deaf ears of the teen that allegedly killed him. Despite this, I think Officer Brown’s dream doesn’t have to die with him. He has truly become the martyr for senseless youth crime.

Earlier this year, St. Louis City Police Chief Joseph Mokwa was quoted as saying that youth crimes were on the rise in the St. Louis area. In 2006, St. Louis African American teens under aged 17 were arrested for committing more than 1,800 Part I crimes (compared to 132 crimes committed by white teens.) This crime category includes murder, manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, arson and other assaults. To remedy this situation, a Night Watch program was instituted to make unscheduled home visits to ensure that high-risk juveniles comply with mandated curfews. It is clear, however, that more needs to be done. It is up to all of us to find new ways to reach out to black teens to encourage a turnaround in their lives.

Whether it is the preacher in the pulpit, the teacher in the classroom or the parent at home, it is important to get the message out to African American youth that crime is not the answer. It is time for the St. Louis African American community to stop turning a blind eye to black teen crime by assuming that it is just a teenage “phase.” With more

and more juveniles being charged as adults for violent crimes, this “phase” can have lifelong implications. It’s time out for blaming everyone else for the problems in our community and not looking inwardly at what we can do to decrease the teen crime epidemic.

At the Urban League, we have installed an Urban Youth Empowerment Program in the East St. Louis area to help out-of-school teens and adjudicated youth find jobs, obtain their GED and other work certifications. We also operate a similar work program in the Missouri Career Center in St. Louis County. In St. Louis City, the League has scholarship programs, the Gear Up program to prepare 8th grade students to become college-ready and the NULITES. The NULITES stand for the National Urban League Incentives to Excel Program that help youths aged 14 – 18 prepare for college, find summer job opportunities and learn skills in effective conflict resolution. For parents and teachers who are dealing with troubled teens, there are many community organizations such as Better Family Life, Matthews – Dickey Boys Club, 100 Black Men, St. Louis Gateway Classic Foundation and others that are qualified to provide assistance. What most troubled teens need is an adult in their lives who cares enough to get them the assistance that they need. In conclusion, it is up to everyone in the St. Louis community to get involved in helping our African American teens find productive paths so that they may lead meaningful and crime-free lives.