

# GrieveLand: Stories of violence and lost dreams from the streets of Mt. Pleasant (videos, photos)

Christopher Evans, Northeast Ohio Media Group By Christopher Evans, Northeast Ohio Media Group

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

posted on August 19, 2015 at 11:06 AM, updated August 23, 2015 at 7:00 AM



Mount Pleasant sits in the heart of Cleveland's Fourth Police District, a jigsaw-shaped chunk of inner city real estate infamous for its crime rate. Baptist churches, beverage stores and bullets define these hard-boiled streets, one beat-down block after another.

This year, there have been 26 homicides in the district, 80 rapes and 390 felonious assaults through August 1, according to the latest statistics from Cleveland Police Department. Rapes are up almost 27 percent and felonious assaults are up 22 percent from the same time period in 2014. Homicides are down 7 percent over last year. But they jumped from two in June to seven in July, according to police statistics.

The East Side neighborhood is a case study in disinvestment and poverty, a community in crisis, cratered by guns, gangs and gutted families.

Enter **Peace in the Hood**, a non-profit, grassroots, empowerment initiative driven by volunteers and true-believers like Khalid Samad, who co-founded the group back in the early 1990s. Its annual Peace Camp ran

from June 22 to July 30. The camp offers the next generation (five-to-18-year-olds) safe sanctuary to learn the lessons of history, the power of non-violence and the discipline of success.  
It champions hope and futures that don't die in the streets.

The 92 kids who participated this year were asked: "How many of you have lost a loved one to violence?"  
All 92 raised their hands.

We talked to four of them, and Nicole Morton, a 37-year-old mother whose kids are in the program.  
"I have more dead friends than you have dead friends," Nicole tells me. These are the voices that we never hear.

**Please, listen.**

**GrieveLand: Stories of violence and lost dreams from the streets of Mt. Pleasant: Drew Barker, 17.**

*Barker survives by keeping a low profile. If he isn't working at Panera Bread, the visual arts student is at home drawing, or boxing at the gym. A wiry lightweight with a long reach, Barker stays motivated by looking in the mirror at the letters tattooed on his upper right arm.*

"The 'F' is for faith. The 'C' is for consistency. And the 'HW' is for hard work.

"I didn't have much [faith] when I was younger so it's like now as I'm getting older I'm starting to see like, 'Well, if you keep faith, then things do get better' . . . having faith is what gets me through my day." ...

"And the consistency: What you gonna accomplish if you're not consistent on anything?" ...

"And then I was taught hard work from my grandfather . . . work is what makes a man a man in my opinion. Nothing should be easy for you." ...

"I got jumped when I was in the fourth grade by some older kids and my dad went back and shot at the kids, and just seeing guns being drawn on him by police officers, that was traumatizing. This was, like, '08, '09." ...

"If that happened now my father would be dead. They wouldn't have hesitated to put a hole in him. [The police] is the enemy. Supposed to be here to serve and protect but they're doing the opposite."

**GrieveLand: Stories of violence and lost dreams from the streets of Mt. Pleasant: Naudia Loftis, 17**  
**Naudia Loftis, 17.**

*Loftis is a petite powerhouse, a poet, an activist who will study business and journalism in college.*

"My aunt, they kicked in her door, shot her in the head . . . it was a home invasion. They shot my uncle in the mouth. He's still here, but she passed away. That was in 2010." ... "And my cousin, I think I was in the sixth

grade, he got shot right there, right around the corner on 139th. They shot him dead in the head and left him there." ... "He was about 27 . . . I know at the time he was homeless. So I think he was just walking and you

know, like, if they see somebody they don't recognize they react terribly." ... "A lot of the people that I'm around are in a gang ... They try to make it seem like it's protection, or it's brotherhood, or just simply like it's what's

needed. But my argument is always, 'I don't think it's needed.' " ... "I live on these streets. I've lived around here since before I was born, my family has. And not anybody in my family is in a gang." ...

"I'm not allowed to get tattoos. I'm the boss. But my mother is the boss boss."

**GrieveLand: Stories of violence and lost dreams from the streets of Mt. Pleasant: Jameel Davis, 17**  
**Jameel Davis, 17.**

*Davis is a big guy, soft-spoken, taciturn. He is building a computer from scratch, buying parts off Amazon and using how-to videos on YouTube.*

"I got into some trouble about a year and a half ago up in Maple Heights and so instead of me missing that year I came down here and did all my schooling. I'm just living with my grandmother . . . my mother's still in Maple." ... "I brought narcotics into the school house. Got pat down. Got expelled." ...

"A few people [lost to violence]. My father most recently. He was in jail actually. Apparently guys approached him with heroin and the heroin broke out on his skin. That made him pass away. I'm not sure what happened because it was all in jail. But this is what was told." ...

*[Jameel's father, Robert Sharp, 36, died of a self-administered heroin overdose on March 26 in Cuyahoga County jail, according to the county medical examiner. The autopsy revealed that Sharp had swallowed a "plastic bag containing heroin." The bag breaks down and the drugs leak out, according to the medical examiner's office. Sharp had been booked into the county jail on March 24 for aggravated vehicular assault, a sheriff's spokesman said. There is an ongoing investigation into Sharp's death, the spokesman said.]*

"Younger brother recently got jumped for his phone. Up in Maple." ... "I been jumped for no apparent reason actually. It makes you wanna do stuff. Like the next day I called up probably about like 50 people. There was 50 people up at that school waiting for them kids to come out so we can have that one on one." ... "Then whoever wanna jump in, it's gonna be a bang out."

**GrieveLand: Stories of violence and lost dreams from the streets of Mt. Pleasant: Natshua Mack, 15  
Natshua Mack, 15.**

*Mack lived two houses down from convicted serial killer Anthony Sowell. She remembers the rancid smell that permeated the neighborhood. Mack, like everyone else, blamed Ray's Sausage Co. She says it blew her mind when it turned out to be dead bodies.*

"I used to be in a gang. I used to fight a lot in school. Get suspended. Used to skip school. Get in trouble. Used to steal . . . little stuff like candy, toys, stuff that I wanted and didn't have." ... "I was just mad at the world for a reason. But I didn't know why." ... "I thought I was big and bad and I wanted to get into a clique or whatever, make me feel like somebody, get noticed. But as I started to get older I felt like this is not the life I need to be living. I could be dead the next day." ... "My mother, she was strung out on drugs. Um, you know, like a crack head or whatever. She wasn't really there for us. She chose crack over her kids." ... "I was raised by my father. He raised three kids all on his own. He told me not to do it [join a gang, steal] because, like, I could end up in jail. I could go into a store and then the clerk could, like, just shoot me. But I was, like, 'Man, you're old. You don't know what you're talking about it.' And I continued to do it." ... "It was a choice for me [to leave the gang.] Like they wasn't, like, mad, mad, but I could tell they were mad, yeah. I had a friend. She was in the gang. She decided she wanted to leave so they let her leave, acted like everything was fine, cool, fine and dandy, but the next day she got beat up." ... "She was jumped." ... "No, I have never been jumped. I don't plan on it either."

**GrieveLand: Stories of violence and lost dreams from the streets of Mt. Pleasant: Nicole Morton, 37  
Nicole Morton, 37.**

*The Folk Nation was the largest gang in Cleveland during the 1990s. Morton was a Folk Queen, a leader. She is a woman of strength and wisdom, a survivor, a mother, a role model.*

"I had a good upbringing. My mom was a single. She did the best she could with my brother and I. She gave us a lot of love and a lot of nurturing. The thing that I lacked most was understanding and a sense of belonging." ...

"I joined the Folks when I was 13 years old ... They gave me a sense of power and they gave me a sense of respect." ... "The path I chose was a rough one. I saw a lot of things that I wished I didn't see. I did a lot of things I wish I didn't do. By the grace of God I'm still standing." ... "My active gang membership stopped at about 24. My oldest daughter was about three years old. And I realized that actively participating in a gang would not be promising for my child's life." ... "My only fear for my children is that . . . they don't understand that the decisions they make now will be with them for the rest of their lives." ... "It's hard to see a person that you knew when you were 14 say 'I wanna be a lawyer,' and then they're writing you from prison." ... "It makes me wonder where our dreams went."

© 2015 cleveland.com. All rights reserved.