

Sun Shine: A united front in youth outreach

By Mark Henderson | October 18, 2015



Courtesy of Pride Productions

Worcester youth participate in the inaugural Unity in the Community event in September.

There is power in numbers.

And the larger the problem, the larger the numbers needed to fight it.

The problem of youth violence in the city of Worcester reached an ugly crescendo this past summer as youth and gun violence overwhelmed the city. Throughout, Worcester groups involved with children did their best to continue to present and reinforce their positive messages.

Ernie Floyd, Ike McBride and Charles Luster had a bigger idea. What if they could bring together all the groups? What if they could create an event around which everyone could rally? What if they could share with the youth of the city all the positive messages being sent?

Floyd, McBride and Luster brought together their three organizations — Floyd runs [Pride Productions](http://www.pridepro.org/) (<http://www.pridepro.org/>), a nonprofit that focuses on teaching youth all aspects of media, from radio and video production to storytelling; McBride is director of operations at the [Boys & Girls Club of Worcester](http://www.bgcworcester.org/) (<http://www.bgcworcester.org/>); and Luster, a leader of the [Worcester Youth Center](http://www.worcesteryouthcenter.org/) (<http://www.worcesteryouthcenter.org/>) — and got the ball rolling.

Their idea became Unity in the Community. Their first event, on Sept. 15, was a pep rally that attracted a crowd of about 200. They called it “Increase the Peace” and held it at the Boys & Girls Club. It was a success.

“We wanted to make sure the kids went back to school on a positive note,” said Floyd.

“I’ve known Ernie since I moved here in 1989, and I know Ike,” Luster said. “So having relationships with different guys in the city that you know who are doing things in the community, it’s always great to help because you know you’re only going to get positive things out of it.”

“Ernie and I had worked together many years on different projects,” McBride said.

“Charles the same thing, so it really became an easy fit once they approached me.

... We’re all part of the Youth Connect umbrella. It made sense to try to put all these

pieces together and try to come up with something.”

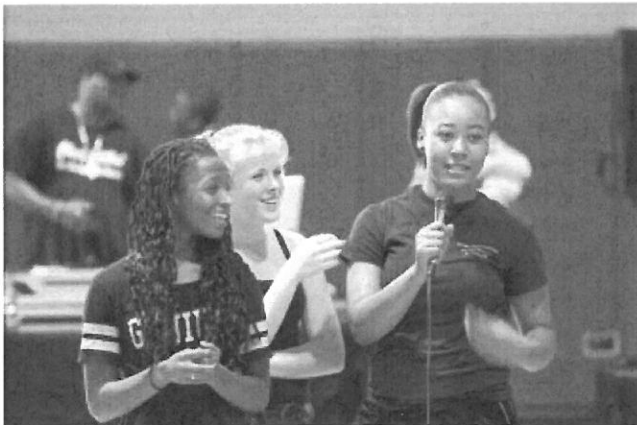
Youth Connect (<http://youthconnectworcester.org/>) is an affiliation of organization that provide neighborhood-based activities to Worcester Youth. Member organizations include the Boys & Girls Club, YOU, Inc., the YMCA of Central Mass., Girls, Inc., Friendly House, the Worcester Youth Center and the YWCA.

Walter Jovel is the assistant director of the **HOPE Coalition** (<http://hopecoalitionworcester.org/blog/>), a partnership of **17 organizations** (http://hopecoalitionworcester.org/blog/?page_id=533) in the city that came together to represent Worcester’s young people. “We try to pride ourselves on being the voice” of those youths, he said. “We often see the media portray youth as troubled or risky or dangerous, and there’s not a lot of positive pieces on youth.”

“We really wanted to strengthen the collaboration of the local youth agencies and the partners, and to recognize the participants and the positive things the youth agencies are doing.” – Walter Jovel, assistant director of the HOPE Coalition

For Jovel, the chance to change the narrative was a driving force in participating in Unity in the Community.

“Everything we do is youth-led, youth-oriented,” he said. “We try to give them as many skills and as much training as possible and let them run the event, do the facilitation and coordination.”



Courtesy of Pride Productions

About 200 Worcester youth participated in the inaugural Unity in the Community event in September.

For the first event, “We really wanted to have them go back to school with some reinforcement of some type of positivity and not have that stain of negativity that was taking place during the summer,” Floyd said.

“I think it’s really important that [for] every negative that takes place that’s

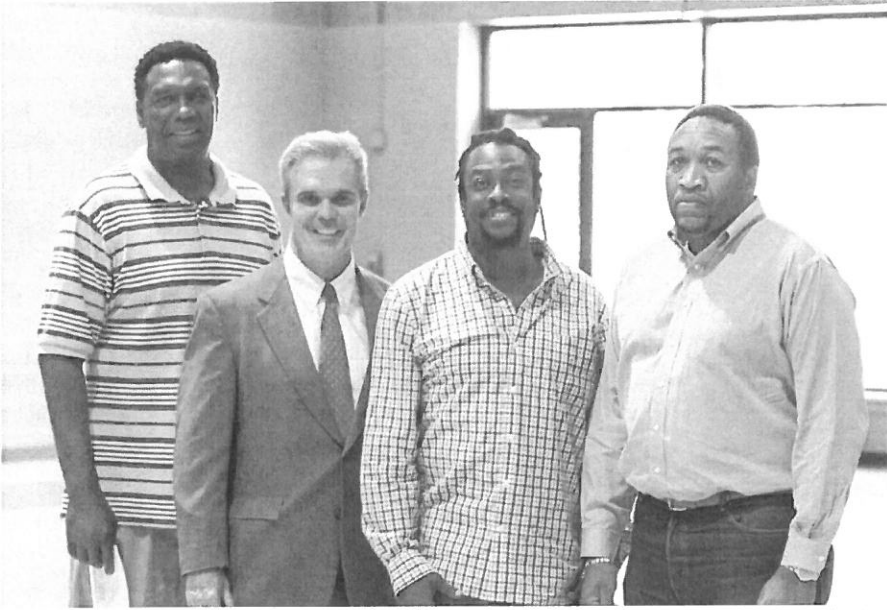
youth-related that there are two or three positive entities. Young people are impressionable, and if they consistently see negativity around them then they’ll grow up to believe that’s what life’s all about.”

That was also what attracted McBride. “Negative sells, negative news sell, negative things sell, so it’s very easy to highlight (that),” he said. “But when a kids does something positive it usually, if it makes any type of media, it’s a blurb or a flash and it’s gone.

“One of the things we’re really trying to push is fact that there are a lot of kids that are doing a lot of positive things in these communities, and we’re not recognizing these kids

and we're not reinforcing that there are positive youth."

"We really wanted to strengthen the collaboration of the local youth agencies and the partners, and to recognize the participants and the positive things the youth agencies are doing," Jovel added. "We invited all the agencies to come out. We got the reaction that we hoped for, everyone came down, a majority of the agencies participated."



Courtesy of Pride Productions

From left, Ernie Floyd of Pride Productions, Worcester District Attorney Joseph Early, Ike McBride of the Boys & Girls Club, and Charles Luster of the Worcester Youth Center at the Unity in the Community Increase the Peace event in September.

In addition, Worcester District Attorney Joseph D. Early Jr. lent financial support and appeared at the rally.

"We were very pleased with the fact the District Attorney came down and supported it," Floyd said. "He gravitated to it quickly because that's what he's about and that's what he's always been about."

The kids, Floyd said, "were active, involved, engaged in the event. Basically, it was a pep rally. It was like, 'OK, let's be positive, let's encourage one another as we go forward during the school year, and let's support each other.'"

"We have a lot of talented people in this community and we wanted to show off that talent, and they did an awesome job," he said.

The success of the inaugural event led Floyd and others to believe there was an opportunity to make Unity in the Community an ongoing initiative, allowing all the youth-involved groups in the city to gather to share their successes and spread their positive messages.

The second Unity in the Community event is a [candidate information session](http://www.pridepro.org/unity-in-the-community-1/) (<http://www.pridepro.org/unity-in-the-community-1/>). It will be held from 4 to 5 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 23, at the Worcester Youth Center, 326 Chandler St. All candidates for at-large seats on the City Council have been invited to attend, Floyd said. The exact number of candidates expected to appear is not finalized, he said.

The forum, which will include youth moderators and feature questions from students at five city high schools — Burncoat, Doherty, North, South and Worcester Tech — will

focus on four youth-related themes: health, education, employment and safety.

“We felt as though the young people should be aware of who’s going in the [City Council] race and how it will effect them for the future,” Floyd said.

“This is a nonpartisan event,” he noted, “so there’s no threat, except that it allows students to be civically involved. At the same time, they have a voice at the table to ask the candidates directly. It also allows candidates to delve more deeply [into] what their youth initiatives are. ... It will allow young people to be civically engaged in the political process.”

Said Jovel: “We’re trying to promote positive mental health and civic engagement with the teens and youth community. We’re hoping that providing this event at a place they naturally go, which is Worcester Youth Center, at a time that’s convenient for them, that they will be able to engage and learn about our civic process in Worcester.”

“The big thing was we wanted to give the kids an opportunity to learn something about the political process,” McBride said. “We wanted them to be able to identify candidates, know who people are in the community, and then we also wanted to see how the candidates are with youth issues.

“For most of us, we were the victims of the political process. And we continue to be so until we educate our youth to understand the process to break the cycle.”

“Once again we get to put the kids right up front as the stars,” Luster said. “The candidates aren’t the stars, the kids are the stars because they’re stepping up to the plate.”

“Time has shown, and the news has shown us, and the world has shown us that we shouldn’t wait till a tragedy takes place before all of a sudden we decide to help a family out, help an individual out, help an organization out or help a community out.” – Ernie Floyd, Pride Productions

The event has also attracted new participants.

Serendipity intervened for Andrew LaPointe, the director of [Dynamy Youth Academy](http://ya.dynamy.org/) (<http://ya.dynamy.org/>).

“It was kind of a happy accident,” he said. Floyd “just walked in the door, and I knew Ernie from other programs that I had been involved with. ... He started telling me about the event, and it was just a great marriage between what he was trying to do and what we do at Youth Academy, because we have a lot of students that are involved in the community. Part of what they have to do for us is be involved in the community. Part of the program is to get connected to different events that give youth a voice.

“When I heard about the event I said, ‘That’s a perfect fit for our program.’ So we wanted to get behind it.”

Floyd believes events such as Unity in the Community can help prevent problems. Indeed, he thinks the problem with unifying events is that they generally happen in response to crises. He hopes Unity in the Community can reduce the likelihood of a crisis.

To that end, he’s looking to create more Unity in the Community events.

“Time has shown, and the news has shown us, and the world has shown us that we

shouldn't wait till a tragedy takes place before all of a sudden we decide to help a family out, help an individual out, help an organization out or help a community out," Floyd said. "Let's not wait until an incident takes place before all of a sudden we realize we have a problem."

Unity in the Community is a "great opportunity to show everybody what they do, not wait till there's a tragedy before everyone comes together," he added.

Creating more events is "exactly what we want to do," Floyd said. "Everyone is making an effort to improve this community in some capacity. This is just a way for us to collaborate with everybody, encourage one another, empower one another."

"I think if more organizations would collaborate together instead of trying to compete with each other we could take care of more youth," Luster said.

Unity in the Community events provide "positive reinforcement to remind the community that there are more positive kids than negative," McBride said. "The flip side is to also highlight and bring awareness for people who have no idea or don't know anything about what's going on."

Jovel said the events also "bring all those organizations together and publicly recognize everyone for the the good stuff they're doing. ... Everybody got a chance to see what all the other youth groups are doing. It brought everyone together to show that we can work together, we can collaborate."

In the end, "We love doing youth work," he said. "We like making the city better for the teens. We like making lasting change we can see years and years from now."

Said Luster: "Do we want more events? Yes, because there's so much to do."

LaPointe said Floyd has found a niche with Unity in the Community.

"It doesn't have to be a big, formal thing," he said. Floyd "did a good job of pinpointing a cause for an event that would be really beneficial. ... The values for the event line up."

"We try to put [youth] in places where they can speak for themselves. We try to facilitate meetings and places and spaces where youth has [a] voice," LaPointe said. Unity in the Community "is a great place for us to plug in and use the skills [they learn]. Really, the community is the practical application for finding your voice.

"For us, that's what it's all about in the community," he said. "There is so many people to partner with. The more that we connect and work with each other, the better opportunities for the students. ... I couldn't be happier to see Ernie walk through my door and hear what he's been up to."