

NEWS

In Chester, new program takes a group approach to healing scars of gun violence

by [Vinny Vella](#), Updated: January 17, 2019



On an early August morning in Chester, Selina Reese faced a task no guardian ever asks for — a task for which she was not prepared.

How was she going to tell Layla, her great-niece who calls her “Momma,” that her father had been shot to death the night before? How could she, someone who never experienced loss in such a violent manner, break the news to a 7-year-old?

“As time went on, I thought about how it would help if she was around kids that could maybe talk to her about the experiences that they have had,” Reese, 36, said in an interview at her hometown’s J. Lewis Crozer Library. “Or even, for me, just tips and pointers for things I could look out for that I maybe I wasn’t paying attention to.”

Now, Reese is better equipped to handle the questions that Layla is starting to ask, questions she knows will only become more frequent as the child gets older.

Together, the two were part of the first group of 11 Chester residents to go through a new type of trauma therapy funded by public grant money, including an award from The Foundation for Delaware County. The 12-week program, which held its last session Jan. 10, was the first of its kind in the county's only city — it brought together people touched by gun violence to heal, collectively, with the aid of licensed, experienced psychologists.

The program is a collaboration between the Chester Community Coalition, a grassroots, faith-based group in the city, and clinicians from the Child Guidance Resource Center in nearby Havertown. And after its first, successful round, its organizers are recruiting more families.

"The big-picture goal is to reduce gun violence in Chester, a massive goal," said Alexia Clarke, the program's director. "But that's the idea: planting the seeds, starting with one family at a time."

Staff from the center led the participants through group conversations about how to handle negative emotions and thoughts. They learned how to direct those feelings, preventing them from festering and perpetuating more violence in the community.



DAVID SWANSON / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Fran Stier and Alexia Clarke (right) sit in the basement of the Shiloh Baptist Church, where the Chester Community Coalition held the first round of cognitive behavioral therapy sessions in its new program.

Fran Stier, the board secretary for the community coalition, said the idea was borne of memorials her group organized for homicide victims, and the group's desire to bring aid to the city that was "more concrete and less symbolic."

"We were talking to people in the community, meeting with them after tragedies," Stier said. "It really knocks the whole family on their back, it's a terrible blow. Any death is a terrible blow, but violent death is especially traumatic."

Chester has played host to a variety of peer-led and faith-based counseling programs, groups where survivors of gun violence come together and grieve. But, as Clarke described it, the community coalition's effort takes those efforts a step further.

"The difference is that these people are trained in how to manage emotional pain and healing," she said. "It's not 'We're all sharing our pain.' They're the ones to help you think about it, and challenge you in a way that a peer might not think to."

The coalition received two grants from Catholic Health Initiatives, enough to bring Clarke on board. She helped design it using the larger of the grants, an award of \$400,000 spread over three years. A third, \$47,500 grant this summer from The Foundation of Delaware County finalized the partnership with Child Guidance Resource Center.

That collaboration, Clarke said, was integral. As she and her colleagues sought input from Chester residents about what programming was needed, they heard a common refrain. "For the adults, a lot of focus was on the people needing to be experienced," Clarke said. "They had negative experiences with student therapists before working on their masters. People who'd get afraid of them when they got upset or would be a little too shocked about what they were telling them."

Clarke spent months recruiting city residents through the coalition's network of community contacts. She attended church services, neighborhood events and school open houses. At one of the latter, she met Reese, there with her daughter.

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It had been a few weeks since Layla's father, Kassim Brown, had been gunned down on James Street, the 12th of 18 homicides in Chester last year. Layla had grown restless.

The girl has been in Reese's life since she was two weeks old. Her mother had her as a teen, and Reese stepped in to help after her sister, Layla's grandmother, died of natural causes.

Brown, 25, was a constant presence in Layla's life, a "good father" who supported her, according to Reese.

"Layla was always a little distant, but there was a change, with her wanting to talk more, being a little more clingy," Reese said. "And every now and then, still asking where her father is."

In September, the program began. A group of parents and their children, spending their Thursday nights inside Shiloh Baptist Church, a sanctuary in the middle of the city. There, they would decompress from the day's stress over communal meals of pizza or pasta and then separate into different age groups, where the true work began.

"The most helpful thing is having people recognize that there are others out there who are going through this," said Brad Richardson, the outpatient division director at Child Guidance Resource Centers. "Allowing them to share their experiences and learn from each other in terms of 'How is this impacting me and how am I dealing with it?'"

Those lessons focused on a wide array of topics, Richardson said. From breathing and relaxation techniques, to art therapy that helped younger participants express themselves.

Reese appreciated that. Brown's death was her first personal brush with gun violence. Growing up in Chester, she saw friends experience the loss, but it had avoided her. She had no frame of reference for how to deal with the complex emotions Layla was feeling, emotions a 7-year-old couldn't possibly articulate.

"We all learned from each other," Reese said. "When you do go through this situation you feel like you're the only one going

through it. But this opened my eyes, because even in a city so small, there are so many other people going through this.”



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